

Alienation by Design:
Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Alien Staff*
and the Spectacular Immigrant



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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Chapter 1: Wodiczko's Immigrant Instruments as Heuristic Prosthesis	9
1. Articulating the Logic of Supplementation	12
2. Negotiating the Immigrant Subject	22
3. Constructivism's Legacy on Art and Social Progress	26
Chapter 2: Wodiczko Screens the Public Sphere	34
1. Capitalist Alienation, a Primer: Marx, Lukács, and Debord	36
2. Ideology and the Neutralization of Public Art	42
3. Spectacle and Screen: Concrete Homogenization	52
Chapter 3: The Critical Alienation of the Theater	61
1. Brecht, Screens, and Alienation of the Stage	63
2. Immigrant as Actor, Staff as Character: Alien of Alien	74
3. Representation as Physical Gesture	81
Conclusion	88
Bibliography	91

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Introduction

During the 1990s, Western liberal democracies began to recognize what was at stake politically, socially, and economically in the debates about foreign nationals arriving in new territories legally and illegally, accepting certain jobs, and demanding, as a consequence, certain political representation. In the United States, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 and the Immigration Act of 1990 demonstrated the critical need to reconsider immigration legislation within a landscape of shifting social paradigms. In France, non-government organizations (NGOs), such as SOS Racisme, began, in this period, to participate in the debate as the radical-right Front National, an anti-immigration, nationalist political party led by Jean-Marie Le Pen, was gaining unprecedented power. Immigration's profound relationships to political, social, and economic concerns coalesced. As Lisa Lowe clarifies, immigration began to subtly reveal its complicated relationship to capitalism. She argues:

As [these acts] attest, however, immigration legislation continues to be the site for the resurgence of contradictions between capital and the state, between economic and political imperatives, between the push-pull of markets and the maintenance of civil rights and is riddled with conflicts as the state attempts to control through law what is also an economically driven phenomenon.¹

It is within this climate that Polish artist, and immigrant to Canada and the United States, Krzysztof Wodiczko developed *Xenology*, "the art and science of the stranger...the immigrant's art of survival."²

Financially supported by the French NGO *SOS Racisme*, Wodiczko designed a series of Immigrant Instruments, a series of objects with the specific needs of immigrants in mind, as part of the *Xenology* project. The main purpose of these instruments is to

¹ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: on Asian American Cultural Politics*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999, p. 20.

² Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles: Writing, Projects, Interviews*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, p. 131.

render individual immigrants visible and audible in the public sphere where they would otherwise generally be overlooked by virtue of structural political and social exclusions or personal, psychotherapeutic limitations. With the Immigrant Instruments, Wodiczko's primary concern remains, however, to critique the various conditions under which the immigrant lives and that constitute him or her as a particular kind of subject.

Barring a few exceptions, the vast majority of the available literature on Wodiczko's compelling works generally suffers from a superficial and cursory treatment of merely the most evident and easily accessible concepts his art interrogates. His idealism is convincing for some, and his faith in progress and his belief that his instruments can genuinely influence people garner much uncritical acclaim; however, these writings offer at best articulate, formalist study guides to the complex politics of his art without discerning the naïveté of certain characteristics of the feel-good engagement with the failures of contemporary democracies. Furthermore, these writings often dilute the dense complexity of Wodiczko's work, and in this respect overlook its real grace. The purpose of this thesis is to shift focus from the broad geo-political concerns of immigration's relationship to citizenry, nationality, history, and their oppressive consequences and toward a critical analysis of the material support of Wodiczko's instruments, focused on the complications associated with his technological devices.

This thesis understands the value of the preceding scholarship, but considers the emancipatory ideals of Wodiczko's critique to neglect the tragic facts of the complexity of alienation as a social and psychological force in contemporary society. Alienation's various forms are the broad focus of this thesis, specifically the role of political, economic, and social conditions in creating alienated subjects. This thesis seeks to

determine whether and in what ways certain of Wodiczko's empowering objects remedy the conditions that necessitate their intervention, and whether and how these objects are complicit in the further production and magnification of the problems of alienation. In contemporary society, where alienation is a ubiquitous consequence of shifting paradigms of production and consumption, Wodiczko's use of screens and technologically mediating equipment to emancipate individuals seems contradictory. However, there are components of Wodiczko's work that distinguish it from other uses of technology; namely, his critique of the conditions that produce alienation put him in a category apart from individuals who comment on alienation itself.

The first chapter of this thesis investigates the prosthetic logic inherent to Wodiczko's design practice. The artist believes that the fundamental role of design is the diagnosis and treatment of specific needs of particular individuals through the use of foreign objects independent of the operators, and this chapter demonstrates how this logic of supplementation simultaneously constitutes *Alien Staff* (1992) as a particular kind of object and the staff's operator as a particular kind of subject. Wodiczko retains this separation between subject and object and resists posthumanist deconstructions of the human, but he argues that subjects are historical formations, constituted by alien forces. *Alien Staff* seeks, on the other hand, to function as a supplement that facilitates its user as they attempt to navigate and critique the forces that constitute them as subjects.

This chapter also argues that while it is illogical to define his work in relation to posthuman discourses, Wodiczko relates his work to Donna Haraway's notion of the cyborg, complicating a purely material and practical function for these instruments. Although he calls *Alien Staff* an Immigrant Instrument Wodiczko designs the *Staff* as a

supplement to the social relationship between the immigrant and his or her audience, acting as a social prosthetic that places the instrument in a legacy of socially committed art that can be traced back to the historical avant-gardes. The social prosthetic relates to Constructivism, but Wodiczko seeks to absorb and transform this artistic legacy left by the avant-gardes.

The second chapter explores Wodiczko's work through a media-archaeological approach that diagnoses a significant concern with the idealism of the artist's desire to produce new models of community through technologically mediated interactions between the operator and his or her audiences. This chapter analyzes numerous, distinct forms of alienation that result from the material conditions of capitalist forces of production and consumption. The social and subjective alienation that Video Display Terminals (VDTs) and the immaterial consumption of images produce in advanced capitalism problematizes Wodiczko's goal of producing new models of community with his technologically mediating instruments.

This is not to argue that Wodiczko's *Alien Staff* is necessarily complicit in what Guy Debord calls the spectacle's "concrete manufacture of alienation."³ Rather, it demonstrates that the belief in the non-alienating use of potentially alienating media puts Wodiczko's idealisms at great risk. Forms of alienation that the artist does not directly entertain suggest a new conceptual terrain that Wodiczko's work must maneuver. This chapter seeks to determine the possible counter-productivity of the centrality of the VDT in Wodiczko's instruments, arguing that if we have shifted into a new paradigm of advanced-capitalist, post-industrial consumption as Debord and Jonathan Crary diagnose,

³ Debord, (1967) 1995, p. 23.

then we have arrived at a moment that complicates the critical potential of Wodiczko's art.

The final chapter of this thesis suggests a reading of the productive potential of alienation informed by Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), which produced concrete forms of alienation in theater productions to inhibit a certain immersive experience of the stage. Brecht sought to facilitate the emancipation of individuals from social and political forces prevalent in the Weimar Republic through the alienation of the audience from what transpired onstage, which allowed them to critique the conditions of the theater and the social realities of the characters therein represented. *Alien Staff*, on the other hand, seeks to facilitate its operator's emancipation from today's political and economic forces of subjectivization, which have transformed since Brecht's time. When we understand that the screen is peripheral in Wodiczko's work, the immigrant body in the flesh becomes a force for the alienation of the audience from the image represented on the screen. The "changeover from representation to commentary"⁴ that Brecht sought to catalyze becomes a condition of legibility for Wodiczko's work.

The interaction between the instrument's immigrant-operator and his or her audience becomes the primary focus of Wodiczko's work as he seeks to interrupt the forces that mediate relationships between individuals and constitute them under various paradigms of alienation. Through the use of techniques that distance the audience and inhibit a social interaction saturated by the VDT, *Alien Staff* may be able to productively employ the screen within contemporary society where screens tend to dilute social relationships in favor of a society where individuals regularly confront one another as representatives of alien forces.

⁴ Brecht, 1964, p. 126.

Today, xenophobia has become a major component of the concrete manufacture of alienated subjects, an alienating force that disregards national boundaries and does not discriminate based on the unseen data on an individual's passport. The heightened sense of awareness of the permeability of geo-political boundaries coupled with a widespread xenophobic gaze asserts the need to understand transnationalism and human migration as pressing academic, socio-political, and economic concerns. As the United States seeks new forms of legislation to control entry to its borders, as Switzerland bans minarets, and as France outlaws the burqa in the public space, it may appear that the celebrated search for a mutual coexistence of diverse groups of individuals may be fading into the past. Within this context, the need to critically address the variety of forces at work that alienate and atomize groups of people and to interrogate the variety of forces that create alienated becomes an ever more pressing academic and political concern.

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Chapter 1: Wodiczko's Immigrant Instruments as Heuristic Prosthesis⁵

Of course the emphasis here is a prosthetic device. A prosthetic device not only is like an additional part or a replacement for a lost body-part but also empowers and extends the ability of a human or an animal. In this sense the 'cyborg' analogy is very close to the experience of migrants, and, as Donna Haraway [*sic.*] also suggested, to women and other groups that are marginalized, silenced, and oppressed.⁶

—Krzysztof Wodiczko

The relationship of humans to the external world of objects is fundamentally within the bounds of a prosthetic logic. Objects supplement, improve, or replace the constituent body parts of individuals, and the practice of making objects that are intended to be used by individuals is what Krzysztof Wodiczko identifies as the defining characteristic of design as a discipline. In the syllabus for a course he co-taught with Warren Sack at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the professors write, "An artifact of design, e.g., a technology, can be conceived of as an extension or prosthesis for an individual or a community. . . . Design often involves deciding how to shape a technology and therefore how to extend an individual or community."⁷

It is not the main task of this chapter, nor is it the focus of this thesis, to elucidate various theoretical approaches to technology as an entity unto itself. What this chapter concerns is the relationship between an individual and an object, and the way the logic of supplementation constitutes individuals as certain types of subjects. The relationship of technology to the human body is complex and will only be relevant to certain degrees in this thesis, but what Wodiczko and Sack observe is that the production of objects for use by humans follows a diagnostic logic with inherent presuppositions about identity and the forces of its construction. The assumption of need constitutes needful subjects in a

⁵ I deliberately choose "Heuristic Prosthesis" to indicate both the practical and metaphoric components of these devices, which is the focus of this thesis.

⁶ Wodiczko, "Open Transmission," *Performance Research* 2.3, 1997, London: Routledge, 7.

⁷ Description taken from the course website: <http://xenial.media.mit.edu/~wsack/ethical-media-art.html>. Last visited April 18, 2010.

biopolitical relationship between designer and product user, which demands the investigation into what Wodiczko calls the “ethics of postindustrial technology.”⁸

Furthermore, observing that objects change people, the prosthetic logic of design practice must be understood within a similar paradigm of its biopolitical potential to constitute individuals as subjects. Sack and Wodiczko argue, “When a technology becomes integrated into the everyday life of a community the community becomes a new beast (e.g., consider societies before and after clothing or, perhaps, the United States before and after the advent of the automobile).”⁹ The supplementation or replacement of body parts additionally constructs certain kinds of subjects. Artificial objects grafted onto an individual’s biological system determine a relationship between an individual and the external world.

This chapter will conclude that Wodiczko produces his Immigrant Instruments, including *Alien Staff* (1992), which is the main focus of this thesis, in order to constitute his operator-immigrants as agents in their own subjectivization, able and willing to take charge of their circumstances. In this way, they might change the way they operate as political subjects in a world system within which it is difficult for immigrants to integrate.¹⁰ Wodiczko recognizes that immigrants are likewise constituted by social, political, legal, and economic forces, and the deficiency he finds in immigrant subjects

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ This is what Michel Foucault calls “care of the self,” which he defines saying, “This ‘cultivation of the self’ can be briefly characterized by the fact that one must ‘take care of oneself.’ It is this principle of the care of the self that establishes its necessity, presides over its development, and organizes its practice.” Care of the self is intimately related to the concept of technologies of the self that arise in his later writing, and this would be a rich source of research for a later iteration of this project. Although this is a significant intertextual reference for Wodiczko, I am less concerned with articulating what Foucault says about the role of particular forces of alienation in contemporary society. What is most important for this thesis is determining how this concept influences our understanding of the conditions of *Alien Staff*. For further reading on “care of the self,” see: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage Books, 1988.

constituted this way is a lack of voice, the inability to speak and to be heard in a society where they are treated as second class human beings. These instruments deconstruct the forces of subjectivization that constitute immigrants as a category set apart from the rest.

As this chapter demonstrates, the primary subjects for Wodiczko's work are immigrants of a certain type, and the broad generalizations of immigrant experiences are one of the main forces of subjectivization that these instruments target. This chapter argues that these instruments deconstruct the generalized identity of the immigrant as a stereotyped category of subjects constructed by media representations and simulacral presentations of the immigrant individual as a certain type of person. The instruments then seek to facilitate the immigrant to become a force in their own reconstruction as a subject. In this way, the instrument's logic of supplementation is seen both to diagnose a certain type of subjectivity (the stereotype of immigrants as a broad category) as well as to facilitate the construction of newer subjectivities.

Furthermore, this chapter explores a dichotomy between Wodiczko's *Alien Staff* understood as a prototype intended as a model for expanded production as opposed to a heuristic device, intended merely to facilitate a rhetorical, intellectual investigation into certain issues that the constellation of immigrant and artifice demonstrates. Both concepts are independently insufficient to understand the complexity of *Alien Staff* as it migrates between these two functions. It demonstrates on the one hand the artist's willingness and desire to expand production of the object, since he believes that it seriously helps its users, as well as his recognition on the other hand that *Alien Staff* fails on a consumer model. In the latter paradigm, *Alien Staff* functions best when it operates heuristically to

reflect the inherent fallacies and shortcomings of the political and economic systems that necessitate its intervention.

Part 1: Articulating the Logic of Supplementation

Wodiczko recognizes that a certain population of immigrants are socially and psychologically constructed as subjects excluded from participation in their adopted societies by virtue of independent, alien forces of media representation, outsider-status in terms of the ruling discourses, language barriers, and traumatic stories of trans-national migration. He hesitates to designate the specific category of immigrants for whom he designs *Alien Staff* since he defines *Xenology*, the project under which he designed the staff, as “the art of refusal to be fused, an art of delamination, deidentification, and disintegration.”¹¹ Within this impulse to restrain from categorizing individuals we begin to understand Wodiczko’s reticence at defining an immigrant as a certain type of person and his unwillingness to coerce his subjects to consider themselves as a certain type of individuals.

The subjects of Wodiczko’s artistic interest with his Instruments are not defined as members of the population of individuals co-extensive with the legal definition of “alien” as defined by Section § 1101 of Title 8 of the United States Code. This political, legislative definition of immigrants denies the subjects their singularity, constructs a population of strangers as equals under the law, and refuses to permit deviation from these subjectivities. Under these laws, an immigrant is a non-native individual living in a foreign country for an extended period of time yet disallowed certain rights of

¹¹ Wodiczko, “Xenology,” *Critical Vehicle: Writings, Projections, Interviews*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, p. 131. He also acknowledges that these instruments would not be useful for every immigrant.

participation. Immigration is either legal or illegal, and its legality is determined by a sub-category of contingencies that determine whether or not the United States is willing to accept that individual. These definitions at this point in discussing Wodiczko's work oversimplify matters, since legislation is fundamentally written in terms of broad, categorical prohibitions and almost always neglects particularities, thus a productive line of questioning must primarily interrogate the way Wodiczko's instruments demonstrate *his* presuppositions about the identities of those individuals that he seeks to supplement and assist.

The instruments in the *Xenology* series primarily perform as a means to mediate communication. When Wodiczko calls *Alien Staff* calls speech-act equipment,¹² he immediately constitutes the object as a supplement to what he identifies as an aphasiac characteristic of his subjects. Wodiczko wants these objects to cater to the specific narrative needs of their individual operators in order to help them navigate their relationships to their environment and to facilitate their self-constitution as *new* subjects.¹³ Wodiczko observes:

Public space is often barricaded and monopolized by the voices of those who are born to speak and prepared to do so. First, this is done at the expense of those who cannot speak because they have no confidence that anyone will listen to them. Second, they have no developed language. Third, they are frequently locked in a posttraumatic silence. There is repression so that certain words cannot be said because particular memory patterns have been shattered. Yet these are the most important speakers in a democracy. They should speak because they have directly experienced its failures and indifference.¹⁴

¹² Krzysztof Wodiczko, "*Alien Staff*," *Assemblage* 23, April 1994, p. 8.

¹³ Wodiczko says, "The resistance of these identities (which conflict with one another and transform themselves in the process) to the colonizing or multicultural categories imposed on them (from outside and inside) is, in fact, the seed of new identity, not only for a particular immigrant but also for the surrounding society." In "Identity and Community: *Alien Staff*," *Critical Vehicles: Writings, Projects, Interviews*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, p. 116.

¹⁴ Patricia C. Phillips, "Creating Democracy: A Dialogue with Krzysztof Wodiczko," *Art Journal* 62.4, Winter 2003, New York: College Art Association of America, p. 36.

After he recognizes that trauma, which often accompanies transnational migrations, has the ability to silence individuals, he further articulates the needs for which *Alien Staff* serves as prosthesis in his interview with Patricia Phillips:

Crossing borders, in all senses of the word, is traumatic. Consider the aftermath, with all of the legal issues, hostility, euphoria, and disappointment. The stages of transformation of identity for the immigrant, the internal dialogues and disagreements, create a very stressful complexity. In the process of becoming a new person, an immigrant must imagine, examine, and question all identities... Those who are ready to negotiate these psycho-political roles need this equipment, an artifice or prosthesis, to begin this demanding process of fearless speech.¹⁵

For ease and clarity, “immigrant” will henceforth refer to the legal definition of “alien,” while “operator-immigrant” will refer to the specific though highly mutable category of individuals that Wodiczko has in mind when he creates his Immigrant Instruments for prosthetic purposes.



Image 1; *Alien Staff*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, first generation, performer unknown, location unknown, 1992.¹⁶

¹⁵ Patricia C. Phillips, “Creating Democracy: An Interview with Krzysztof Wodiczko,” *Art Journal* 62.4, Winter 2003, p. 38.

Wodiczko has produced a significant body of writing and interviews that mention the ancient Greek concept of *parrhesia* that was later revisited by Foucault. In addition, the notion of trauma as a silencing force is significant and relevant to this discussion, but the psychiatric dimension of trauma and the history of trauma narratives significantly divert this discussion of the prosthetic logic evidenced by Wodiczko’s art. The question of recovery and the parallel discourse of memory and trauma are deeply rooted in psychoanalytic discourses that would undermine the trajectory of this thesis.

¹⁶ All photographs of Krzysztof Wodiczko’s work are © Krzysztof Wodiczko.

In this image of a performance with *Alien Staff*, two women stand in the middle of a city square and look at each other in the eyes as they exchange remarks. The object is approximately the height of the woman who holds it and contains a screen and a speaker that project a video and soundtrack of her own talking head. The other woman probably noticed movement on the surface of the object at about eye level where a colorful square is grafted into the stainless steel ornament or saw a clear container holding papers and other small objects. These curiosities piqued her interest, and she decided to investigate this remarkable assemblage. Sparked by another curiosity, other passersby may feel inclined to solve the riddle of this social interaction or to simply pass without any further scrutiny, too busy to divert their strides or simply uninterested.

The face on the screen narrates stories of its operator's past and present life that she has recorded in advance in sessions with the artist, while the clear container holds passports, visa applications, pictures of loved ones, or any other significant artifact for the woman's life story. At one point as she operates the *Staff* and answers queries by passersby, the woman says, "I'm a part of the *Staff*, we're together. We travel together. It's a kind of purification on my part. It's a concretization of suffering and tears, a way of embodying them differently."¹⁷

Pictured here is the first generation of *Alien Staff* (1992), technologically and conceptually the simplest Immigrant Instrument that Wodiczko produced. It consists of a single video feed of a prepared and prerecorded script (what Wodiczko calls the video-history to deliberately distinguish it from interviews) and a clear plastic container (or

¹⁷ Wodiczko, "Voices of the *Alien Staff*," *Critical Vehicles*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, p. 114. As a minor side note, the identity of the woman operating *Alien Staff* in this image is unclear based on the available literature. Patricia Pirreda is quoted as making this remark in "Voices of *Alien Staff*," but for complete transparency, it is necessary to acknowledge that it is unclear who the woman is in this picture.

Reliquary) in the middle of the staff meant to carry objects that the immigrant finds significant to her narrative.¹⁸ Speaking about this iteration of the *Alien Staff* project, Wodiczko says, “The *Alien Staff* is a piece of storytelling equipment and a legal and ethical communications instrument and network for immigrants. It is an instrument that gives the singular operator-immigrant a chance to ‘address’ directly anyone in the city.”¹⁹

Based on this image and Wodiczko’s description of how it operates, this instrument is best understood to function primarily as a tool or a support for its operator, literally like a staff that an individual carries with him or her to assist with a long journey. The operator-immigrant in this picture works with the staff because she cannot communicate on her own by virtue either of her own inability to formulate her narratives properly or by virtue of the intimidating environment in which she survives. She requires this artifice to verbalize her stories and negotiate her relationship to her past and present identities. She choreographs the video-history in sessions before bringing the object into public, and the instrument speaks the traumatic narrative on her behalf though it does not replace her own ability to speak while she holds it. It follows from this definition of the prosthesis that the object merely contains the operator-immigrant’s narrative, much like the Reliquary contains the artifacts of her past, while it permits her to simultaneously justify or challenge her prerecorded story when the audience asks questions.

In the logic of supplementation, Wodiczko conceives of his operator-immigrant as constructed by the social and political forces of his or her adopted societies as inarticulate subjects with deviant identities that burden their new societies and are more easily overlooked than entertained. The staff is intended to refigure the immigrant subject

¹⁸ Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art: Interviews*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000, p. 341.

¹⁹ Wodiczko, 1999, p. 104.

through his or her ideally therapeutic process of narration that constitutes him or her as an empowered subject. In public, it is meant to facilitate the surrounding environment to see things they would otherwise overlook, constituting the operator-immigrant as a force of subjectivization in his or her own right.

For later generations of *Alien Staff* (1993), Wodiczko employs advanced, interactive technology to rewrite the relationship between the operator-immigrant and the object. Although this entails a paradigm shift in the prosthetic relationship between the immigrant and the object, it does not necessarily betray a new disposition for Wodiczko's aesthetic and design aspirations of assisting with the constitution of immigrant subjectivities. Before he or she carries the second and third versions into public, the operator prerecords multiple stories and is able to interact with the *Staff* to alternate between narratives in public thanks to technological advancements. Rather than one Reliquary, there are a series of containers separated by sensors that the operator can engage to activate and alternate between narratives. Russian scientist Léon Theremin, most recognized as the inventor of the eponymous musical instrument that produced sound without any physical contact between operator and instrument, invented the electric field sensing technology used in this generation of the staff.²⁰

²⁰ Wodiczko 1999, p. 107.

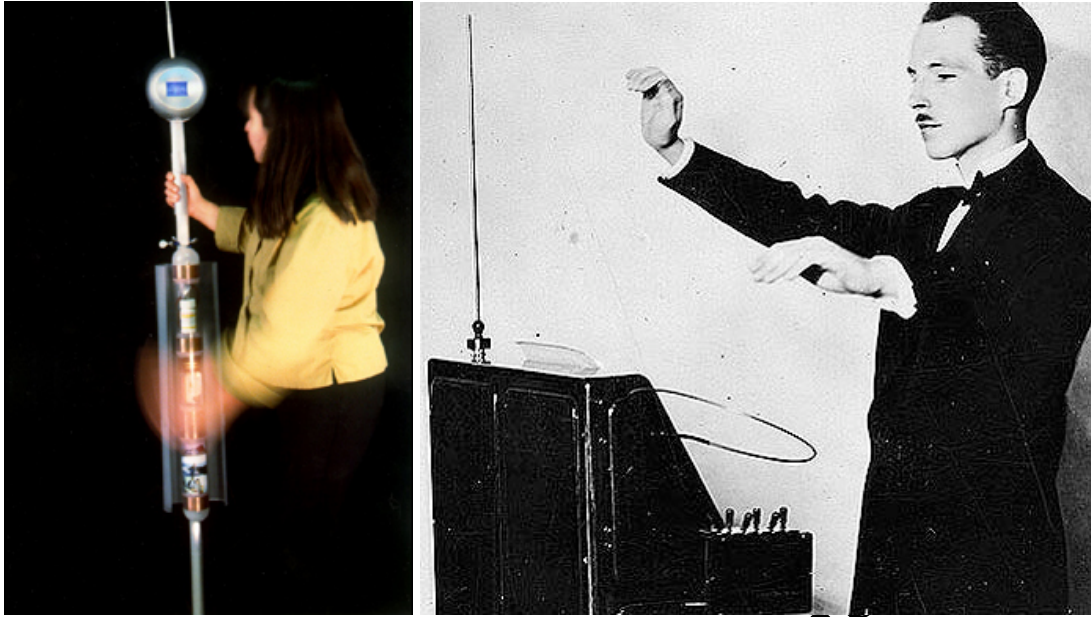


Image 2: *Alien Staff*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, second generation, performer unknown, location unknown, 1993.

Image 3: Theremin demonstrating his “music stand” model. *Philadelphia Press*, February 22, 1928.

Rather than simply accompanying the operator in public as a narrative repository, the later generation of *Alien Staff* reacts to the individual as an extension of his or her body and central nervous system, responsive with her movements and thereby her will, more than merely as a physical support and container. Better grafted to the immigrant’s will, the object shifts into a distinct definition of the prosthesis that conceives of certain objects as integrated extensions of an individual subject.

What is significant about this paradigm shift is that while technologically advanced prosthetics that replace body parts further facilitate the individual’s bodily capacities and bring him or her closer to normalization, the second generation of *Alien Staff* uses this interactive technology to further empower the individual’s control over their staff. This reinforces the immigrant’s agency in relation to the object, whereas the further technological sophistication of a hand replacement actually demonstrates that the patient’s agency is more deviant from the norm in the absence of the replacement than

would a simple mechanical device. In other words, advanced technology in a bodily replacement constitutes the patient, pre-supplement, as hyper-deficient and capable to be supplemented with varying degrees of fulfillment, in contrast to the second generation of *Alien Staff*, which does not imply any greater deficiencies on the part of the operator. Rather the increasingly complicated technology demonstrates the operator's inherent potential for virtuosity with the instrument, constituting the operator as inherently *more* capable, pre-supplementation, than the earlier generation.

The interactivity of the second generation, however, threatens to encourage an interpretation of Wodiczko's work along the lines of cyborg theories or posthuman discourses. In the same syllabus quoted earlier, Wodiczko says, "Various theorists and technologists have termed the aggregate of an individual and a technology a 'cyborg.'"²¹ The translatability of human cognition into data, a series of 1s and 0s that a computer can interpret and respond to, throws the Cartesian subject into radical disarray, but Wodiczko does not seem to want to leave the human subject as deconstructed. As this chapter has demonstrated, Wodiczko's instruments are concerned with supplementing individuals in order to constitute *new* kinds of subjects in dialog with the other, alien forces that constitute immigrants as subjects against their will. The next section will contend with this cyborg/posthuman comparison more sufficiently.

In a final shift, Wodiczko's *Mouthpiece* (1993), also known as *Porte-Parole*, physically attaches to the immigrant's body with straps and covers his or her mouth as its replacement. Once again, the operator prerecords a video, and the *Porte-Parole* provides an easily searchable database of these sound bites that the immigrant can summon on

²¹ Description taken from course website: <http://xenia.media.mit.edu/~wsack/ethical-media-art.html>. Last visited April 18, 2010.

command with any of his or her keyword search terms spoken into a microphone hidden behind the screen. The similarities between *Mouthpiece* and the *Alien Staff* encourage a reinterpretation of the operator's subjectivity by virtue of this integration of machine and human; however, there are differences that complicate attempts to simply equate these two works. While *Mouthpiece* retain the interactive dimension of the second generation of *Alien Staff*, it literally replaces the operator's mouth insofar as it functions. By virtue of this observation, *Mouthpiece* ought to be understood to operate within a replacement, as well as supplement, logic. The replacement for a missing or inoperable body part recalls Freud's prosthetic jaw about which he once said, "Man has as it were become a prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times."²² In a noteworthy footnote Freud defines prosthetic: "A prosthesis is the medical term for an artificial adjunct to the body, to make up for some missing or inadequate part: e.g. false teeth or a bad leg."²³



Image 4: *Mouthpiece (Porte Parole)*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, performers unknown, Helsinki, Finland, 1993. Courtesy Galerie Lelong.

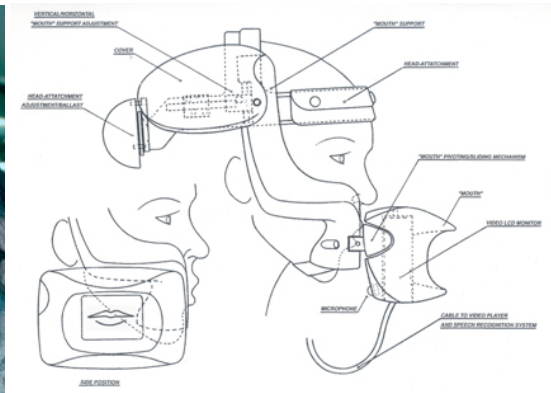


Image 5: *Mouthpiece (Porte Parole) Variant 2*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, sketch, dimensions unknown, 1997. Courtesy Galerie Lelong.

²² Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929), ed. James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1961, p. 44.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

Natalie, one of the operator-immigrants from France, suggests we are correct in this reading off her relationship to her auxiliary mouth and contends that while *Mouthpiece* (1993) is proximate to her face, it still feels alien: “You wear this object on your face, and it’s very, very close to you. You wear this object on your face, but at a distance.”²⁴ Wodiczko’s object bears no pretention to be an operable supplement or a genuine replacement of the operator’s own mouth, but it speaks for her nonetheless. They are pieces of armor, tools for survival, and there is something comforting for at least Natalie in the distance it provides between her and her traumatic narratives by virtue of the alienating distance between history and the artificial object. She says, “Anyway, when you wear the object in the street, people can easily think that it is not your mouth that is on the screen. It’s reassuring, and the feeling takes away some of the responsibility.”²⁵

The different objects in the Immigrant Instrument series suggest different articulations of Wodiczko’s conception of the relationship of his objects to their operators. The instruments become slightly smaller and more manageable, but no less discreet, and they each demonstrate different ways of constructing subjects through their employment of technological devices. What is unclear, however, is where precisely these instruments stand in relation to the notion of the human subject as an historical formation constructed by various social and political forces. The next section will determine what remains after Wodiczko finishes with the operator and how his work withstands the impulse to deconstruct the human altogether.

²⁴ Wodiczko, “Voices of the *Mouthpiece*,” *Critical Vehicles*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, p. 128.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

Part 2: Negotiating the Subject

Despite their construction of human/machine aggregates, Wodiczko's instruments remain strikingly distant from what cyborg and posthumanist theorists say about the dissolution of the differences between the human and the machine on which Cartesian subjectivity is based. Wodiczko identifies Donna Haraway's theory of the cyborg as a significant intertextual reference for his work, since her notion that the aggregate of machine and human is a force of resistance against the hegemony of Western, white, phallogocentric discourses. Echoing this idea Wodiczko makes comments about *Alien Staff* that are remarkably similar:

This equipment is to be used by those who are extremely angry and determined to speak. But also by people that [*sic.*] feel more 'cyborgian' than others. A 'cyborg' is a cybernetic organism—a hybrid of machine and organism—a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is linked to social relations, our most important social construction, and to the world of change and technological development...Of course the emphasis here is a prosthetic device.²⁶

The ontological status of these objects complicates Wodiczko's evocation of Haraway's cyborg as a model for comprehension of his work. If he is serious about this comparison to the cyborg, Wodiczko divulges the metaphorical and heuristic dimensions at play in his objects. Like Haraway, he constructs human/machine assemblages as heuristic devices, for that, I would argue, is precisely how we are to understand Haraway's cyborg.²⁷ On the other hand, if these are to be considered seriously as prototypes for practical instruments, his relationship to the cyborg is not as straightforward as he makes it sound.

²⁶ Wodiczko, "Open Transmission," *Performance Research* 2.3, 1997, London: Routledge, 7.

²⁷ I am siding with Peter Hitchcock who argues that the cyborg is "a heuristic device: it is a way to learn about the forms of politics possible at the end of the 20th century." See, Hitchcock, "The Grotesque of the Body Electric," *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences*, eds. Michael Bell and Michael Gardiner, London: Sage, 1998.

Wodiczko makes his most candid claim that these instruments must be taken seriously as practical solutions to the perceived problems of immigrant subjectivity in his interview with Christiane Paul. Remarking on an exhibition of a few of the instruments, he says:

The person who is running a clinic for immigrants in Rotterdam and is an immigrant herself evaluated the project and stated in public that what I had done in two weeks was something they couldn't achieve in a year in the clinic because from a medical, psychological point of view, I had turned the immigrants into 'both doctors and patients.' In just a short period of time, the immigrants had gained enormous confidence and were pleased with themselves.²⁸

This is certainly the language of a designer interested in his objects as prototypes, trying to convince unbelievers with a quote from a reliable authority. He believes in progress and utilizes the public declamation of the success of his work to defend himself against critics. He faithfully demands that we take these objects seriously when he says:

The basic idea is to improve the existing world. In fact, both technology and design—technology as technical opportunity and design as the relation between this opportunity and the world of needs—can reveal and clarify needs that should not exist... With media and technology we can achieve two things at the same time. We can do cultural work and provide access to the circulation of power for those who are least likely to have it... Those who are marginalized, displaced, and misfortunate could in fact become agents of this new and prophetic way of understanding the world.²⁹

He invokes the image of an army of immigrants wearing these devices into public: "I imagine crowds of strangers presenting themselves in such unsolicited disclosures as they make their way through the city. To help them do so successfully amidst the stormy interferences of the contemporary world or communications and media is the purpose of this special psycho-communications equipment."³⁰

²⁸ Christiane, Paul, "The Prophet's Prosthesis: An Interview with Krzysztof Wodiczko," *Sculpture 18.4*, May 1999, Washington DC: International Sculpture Center, p. 37.

²⁹ Paul, 1999, p. 37.

³⁰ Wodiczko, 1999, p. 133.

If these objects are intended to function exclusively as practical, therapeutic devices, then one must contend with the outrageous appearance of each of these objects. The inexplicable excessiveness is counter-intuitive in an economy dominated by the logic of streamlined equipment, which would entail an ever-decreasing size, unless counteracted by increased efficacy. Based on pure appearance, if any of these objects were proposed as prototypes of personal prostheses, one would certainly object that their appearance alone is enough to humiliate whoever wears them and that their obvious and assertive presence cannot constitute a purely therapeutic function.³¹

According to N. Katherine Hayles, posthuman discourses "[p]rivilege] informational patterns over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life... The posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born."³² After a posthumanist or transhumanist gets through with the human subject, the only thing left is a series of electronic impulses infinitely translatable between various material embodiments. While Wodiczko also deconstructs the human subject, it is not in the service of abolishing Cartesianism in the same sense as posthumanism.

Wodiczko does not promote the idea of the interchangeability of human parts, replacing mouths, improving voices, etc. As Mark Rakatansky argues, Wodiczko wants to move beyond a *naïve* humanism that presupposes a complete and autonomous figure in favor of a humanism that considers the social and political forces that constitute

³¹ A deeper analysis of this notion will be provided in the third chapter.

³² N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 3.

individuals as subjects, which might be called a new humanism.³³ After Wodiczko gets through with his immigrant-operators, he is ideally left with individuals who can speak on their own and participate in their own constitution as subjects rather than as deconstructed subjects pre-determined by their status as electric impulses that can translate being various material instantiations.

Wodiczko's desire is not, as we shall see further evidenced in later chapters, to create more subtle and fully integrated devices to process the psychological traumas of his operator-immigrants. The outrageous appearances serve their own function to facilitate in the deidentification of the operator from the instrument. In contrast to advanced medical prosthetics that become part of their wearers, *Alien Staff* and *The Mouthpiece* are often perceived as awkward, inexplicable supplements, and in fact the absurdity and awkwardness of these instruments command a psychic dissonance in the audience, which we will later see composes a significant part of the social dimension of this instrument.

Despite the clinician in Rotterdam who publicly proclaims the success rate of these pieces, the notion that these expensive, flamboyant objects are meant solely for traumatized individuals is entirely underdetermined. As personal objects, these devices would at best serve only to treat the condition and not the source or cause of the condition and worse to further isolate their operators. Were Wodiczko's objects merely personal, they would do little to change the material reality that brought about the conditions of the

³³ Rakatansky says, "If the question is (and it is) how to proceed beyond a naive humanism, a humanism that represses any difficulties or complexities by presenting the body as something whole, complete, total, autonomous, safe, and free in spirit then it must be said that the figure per se is not the problem. The problem is the evocation of the figure as a stand in, as a surrogate, for dealing with, for addressing, the problem the figure proposes—the problem, that is, of the social and psychological construction of the human subject." See: Rakatansky, "Krzysztof Wodiczko—Disfiguring Refiguring," *Assemblage* 23, April 1994, p. 18

operator-immigrant, the conditions that forced him or her to leave his or her homeland and the conditions that continue to constitute him or her as a geo-politically alienated subject. To resolve the psychological conditions of the immigrant without some more profound social change would entail the permanence of these extensions of the operator-immigrant, since as long as the conditions remain, there will always be a need for these objects.

However optimistic, Wodiczko is interested in the creation of lasting change via these objects and thus retains their ostentatious look because in this logic they remain as merely heuristic devices. One final notion of the prosthetic remains that of the “social prosthetic” function. The immigrant’s relationship to their surrounding society, and the way that society relates to them via these instruments rewrites the prosthetic logic of *Alien Staff* as a (semi) permanent extension of the body (politic).³⁴ Rather than denying or delegitimizing Wodiczko’s seriousness about these objects, the solution to this confusion surrounding the object’s status as a prototype or as a heuristic device is to understand their double function.

Part 3: Constructivism’s Legacy on Art and Social Progress

Alien Staff does not only seek to turn the operator-immigrant into a functioning member of society by providing them with the means to communicate and critically distance themselves from their traumatic experiences. It also seeks to change the surrounding environment by inserting itself into the urban fabric as a social prosthetic that helps its audience to see things they would otherwise ignore. The instrument’s social

³⁴ “Could this device create new conditions that would soon render the need for it obsolete? Or, if needed, could it become a prosthesis, a (semi)permanent extension of the body (politic)?” Wodiczko, “Designing for the City of Strangers,” *Critical Vehicles*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, p. 10.

prosthetic dimension arguably functions heuristically as a machine of vision assisting the audience in seeing the world of the oppressed within their own borders. In this respect, we can draw a parallel between the *Alien Staff* as social prosthesis and the work of the historical avant-gardes, particularly Vladimir Tatlin and Dziga Vertov's.

Born in 1943 in Warsaw, Wodiczko spent the first part of his life in communist Poland, before deciding that it would be in his own interest to immigrate to Canada due to censorship laws and the possibility that he might eventually be denied an exit visa. After graduating in 1968 from the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts with a degree in Industrial Design, he began working for Polish Optical Works designing consumer-grade products. Wodiczko says of his training, "I was trained to be a member of the elite unit of designers, skillful infiltrators who were supposed to transform existing state socialism into an intelligent, complex, and human design project."³⁵

What this remark echoes is Vladimir Tatlin's commitment to turning art into a science, a technology for human improvement, and Wodiczko even cites *Letatlin* (1930-1932), pictured below, as a significant influence on his own Constructivist tendencies. Tatlin designed this everyday, personal flying machine for the masses,³⁶ and the relationship between this object and the prosthetic dimensions of land and air travel have significant overlap with Wodiczko's work that cannot be fully addressed in this thesis. According to John Milner:

Much modern technological development was repetitive and accumulative in detail, tending to adapt and evolve earlier constructions to new ends and to force material into predetermined, preconceived distributions. Such an attitude had long been rejected by Tatlin, and his glider was a whole and integral invention. Tatlin was able to claim with justification that art was moving out into technology, for a real contribution was being

³⁵ Douglas Crimp, Rosalyn Deutsche, Ewa Lajer-Burchard, eds., "A Conversation with Krzysztof Wodiczko," *October* 38, Autumn 1986, p. 36.

³⁶ "Tatlin described his glider as 'an everyday object for the Soviet masses, an ordinary item of use.'" John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, p. 220.

made.³⁷

The image of human flight, of the individual liberated from the strictures of his or her earthbound condition, is the impulse for this design, and there exist many crossovers as well between Wodiczko's work and various design dispositions, but what this thesis must contend with is the distance Wodiczko places between himself and the ideological nature of the historical avant-gardes.

Critically influenced by Constructivism, while having lived to see the failure of the utopian ideologies of the Soviet-era political, social, and economic programs, Wodiczko is critical of unchecked utopianism and a work like *Vehicle* (1971-1973) demonstrates that he is not limited by the uncritical idealism of the avant-gardes. *Vehicle* is an object designed only for the artist.

In the image below, a man walks past the artist on his *Vehicle*. At the far left corner of the machine, the pulleys that control its movement are visible. The curiosity of seeing Wodiczko pacing back and forth along this platform as he propels the vehicle in one direction draws the attention of the passerby. Wodiczko identifies pacing with the fundamental physical activity of philosophizing, but as the excessive energy required for motion is a counterproductive model of transportation, Wodiczko critiques the excessive energy consumption of bureaucracies caught up in paperwork and decision-making. The deliberate inability of this vehicle to turn also exposes the artist's prejudices about unidirectional notions of progress or ideas of the infinite perfectibility of humankind. The critique that *Vehicle* levels is that unidirectional, uncritical approaches to progress lead nowhere fast.³⁸

³⁷ John Milner, 1983, p. 224.

³⁸ For more on Wodiczko's Constructivist tendencies and influences, see the bibliography.

To place this object in our logic of the prototype versus the heuristic device, it is clear that Wodiczko is explicitly disinterested in designing a prototype for transportation. *Vehicle* blunts its critique while inserting itself, ever so subtly, into the fabric of public life. The artist adopts on the one hand certain utopian ideals concerning technology's potential for improving society, and on the other hand a recognition of the inherent limitations of blind faith in progress. In his ideal world, his instruments empower their users to become prophets and messengers of the democratic possibility and compel the surrounding society to heed the wisdom of its victims, though he restrains from dictating an ideology to which humans should bound.

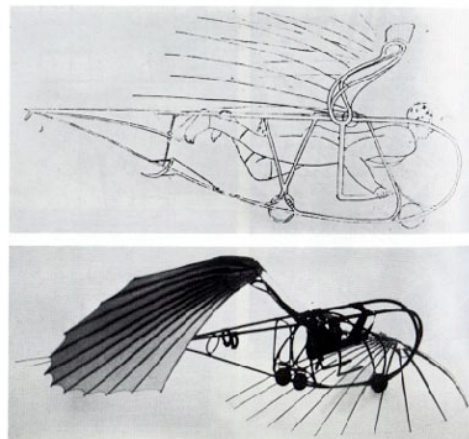


Image 6: *Vehicle*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, wood and assorted materials, performed by Krzysztof Wodiczko, dimensions unknown, performance location unknown, 1971-1973.

Image 7 & 8: *Letatlin*, Vladimir Tatlin, drawing, dimensions unknown and *Letatlin*, Vladimir Tatlin dimensions variable, 1930-1932.

Dziga Vertov's filmic practice constitutes a radically artistic, social project, and Arnette Michelson has produced a rich body of research on his work, in particular an analysis of his film *Kino-Glaz* (1924) and Vertov's use of experimental techniques to demonstrate the social emancipatory potential of the camera. Vertov's famous concept of the *Kino-Eye* is an inherently prosthetic notion that takes as its starting point the imperfections of human vision and the asymptotically infinite perfectibility of

mechanized vision. Michelson says:

The shared ideological concern with the role of his art as the agent of human perfectibility, of a social transformation which issues in a transformation of consciousness in the most complete and intimate sense, the certainty of accession to that 'world of naked truth' are grounded in the acceptance, the affirmation of, the radically synthetic quality of film-making in the stylistics of montage.³⁹

The famous symbol of the *Kino-Eye* is the superimposition of a human eye on the lens of a camera, taken from *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), which bears striking formal resemblance to the image below of a woman operating the second generation of Wodiczko's *Alien Staff*, whose screen only projects the eyes of the operator-immigrant.

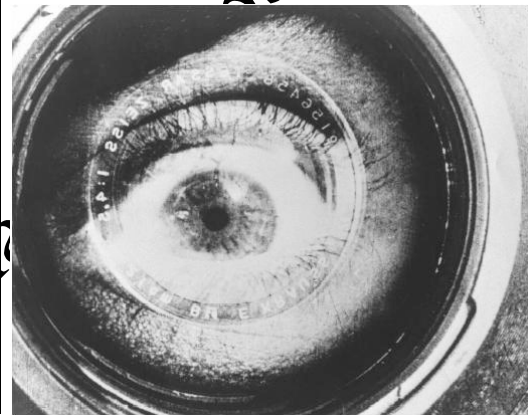


Image 9: *Alien Staff*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, second generation, performer unknown, location unknown, 1993.

Image 10: Still from *Man with a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov.

Vertov employs the camera and editing techniques to construct his audience members as revolutionary subjects as he shows them the material conditions of society, the means of production, and the condition of the proletariat. Vertov's *Kino-Eye* extends the epistemological reach of the human subject in the same way that Wodiczko's Instruments render visible the conditions and narratives of the local population of immigrants. For Vertov, the camera serves an epistemological role capable of decoding reality and presenting to the audience things they are unable to see by virtue of the

³⁹ Annette Michelson, "From Magician to Epistemologist," *Artforum*, March 1972, p. 64.

limitations of human embodiment. As he says in “Provisional Instructions to the Kino-Eye Group”:

Our eyes see very poorly and very little—and so men conceived of the microscope in order to see invisible phenomena; and they discovered the telescope to see and explore distant and unknown worlds. The movie camera was invented in order to penetrate deeper into the visible world, to record and explore visual phenomena, so that we cannot forget what happens and what the future must take into account.⁴⁰

And in “The Essence of Kino-Eye,”

Our basic, programmatic objective is to aid each oppressed individual and the proletariat as a whole in their effort to understand the phenomena of life around them... This objective of ours we call kino-eye. The decoding of life as it is. Using facts to influence the workers' consciousness. The establishing of a class bond that is visual (kino-eye) and auditory (radio-ear) between the proletarians of all nations and all lands, based on the platform of the communist decoding of the world—that is our objective.⁴¹

In a particularly striking scene from *Kino-Glaz* (1924), Vertov elucidates the means of production necessary for beef to reach consumers in a market place. Following an intertitle that says, “Don’t buy from the private sector. Buy from the cooperative,” the film shows a woman walking backwards to the Moscow Province Cooperative of the Handicapped: The First Red Supermarket, which boasts that it receives its meat directly from the slaughterhouses. “Kino Eye moves time backward,” another intertitle announces, before the camera shows a hanging carcass that is then drawn along the ceiling tracks into another room where its innards are returned and its skin replaced. The reconstituted cow begins to move its legs, and then its legs try to run as it lies on its side, just before the cow stands back up. The film then shows a group of men leading cows out of the slaughterhouse backward and returning them to the pasture before the film returns

⁴⁰ Dziga Vertov, “The Essence of the Kino Eye,” (1925) *Kino Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Kevin O’Brien, ed. Annette Michelson, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 67. While a designer at Polish Optical Works, Wodiczko notably worked on designs for microscopes. See: Lukasz Ronduda, “Krzysztof Wodiczko—Art and Design,” *Piktogram* 7, 2007. Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Piktogram, pp. 20-27.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

to chronologically sequential action. Vertov's message is that the best beef comes from workers that are members of a collective. His Kino Eye is intended to mobilize the workers in the service of the communist party as an extension of the body (politic).

The myopia of the body politic that Wodiczko's Instruments extend is a structural problem, apparent, as he argues, only to the outsiders, those who are the victims of exclusion in democracies. The Immigrant Instruments extend the "vision" of a community of insiders by rendering visible the inherent contradictions of a society, something they would not otherwise see or be aware of, by exposing in the public space the narratives of those who are the victims of its blind self-ignorance. The body politic is incapable to achieve this second-order awareness on its own but recognition of these structural problems of Western democracies requires an intellectual faculty improved through the Immigrant Instrument as a heuristic device, rather than a perceptive or sensual faculty improved by the *Kino-Eye*.

In conclusion, Wodiczko's conception of the immigrant thus far constitutes the operator-individual, before the therapeutic preparation for the performance, as constructed by social and political forces that produce therapeutic and narrative needs whose resolution the *Alien Staff*, and the other Immigrant Instruments, are intended to facilitate. In the continued presence of certain socio-political and economic conditions, the instruments would prove merely to resolve the symptoms and not the causes of the social and psychotherapeutic needs of the immigrant. Wodiczko understands that to treat the operator-immigrant's symptoms with an efficient, prosthetic device would do little to change the material conditions that have brought about the need *for* the device. Thus, *Alien Staff* must create new possibilities for the operator-immigrant to participate in their

own constitution as political and social subjects. It operates as a personal prosthetic, but we must understand also how it operates to change the social and political conditions of the individual's reality in order to critique *Alien Staff* and how it fluctuates between the models of the prototype and the heuristic device.

It is possible to analyze Wodiczko's Immigrant Instruments as prosthetic devices ideally meant to facilitate their operator-immigrants to critically distance themselves from their past, but the assertive technological dimensions of these instruments inhibits understanding them in a cyborg or posthuman discourse. Rather than grafting practical objects into or onto the bodies of immigrants, Wodiczko has chosen obvious, bulky, awkward object that accompany immigrants into the public space *in order to* draw attention to them rather than to produce aggregates of human and machine that threaten prior notions of the possibility of human subjectivity *tout court*.

Rakatasky argues correctly that these instruments conscript the operator-immigrant's body to critique naïve humanisms that take for granted the social and psychological construction of the human subject, and that the supplementation of the immigrant is not *about* the immigrant body, but ought to be analyzed with consideration for the social system that surrounds it. The next chapter addresses the technological condition of these instruments in greater detail focusing on the VDT as an interface between the individual and their audience with the help of critiques of different forms of alienation informed by Karl Marx and Guy Debord.

Chapter 2: Wodiczko Screens the Public Sphere

Wodiczko's installation was a magnificent achievement, at once poignant and precise, portraying immigration as emblematic of the rootlessness at the heart of modernity. Migration emerges as the *sine qua non* of survival: everyone is always on the move, unsure of their destination [*sic.*], and never far from the maddening crowd. But in dramatizing the problems of immigrants with such high-tech elegance, Wodiczko raises a question that remains unanswered: To what degree does the barrage of electronic images in industrial societies actually exacerbate our sense of isolation?⁴²

—Donald Kuspit

The television screen, or video display terminal (VDT), that mediates the relationship between the operator-immigrant and his or her audience is the most striking dimension of Wodiczko's *Alien Staff*, recurring in each of his instruments to varying degrees of prominence and with various degrees of social mediation. If these instruments seriously entertain the social prosthetic dimension asserted at the end of the previous chapter, and if Wodiczko believes that "*Alien Staff* explores, exposes, and proposes [a] new discursive model of identity...as a possible model for a new community,"⁴³ then it is necessary to contend with the social relations that technological mediation typically engenders. Guy Debord most notably diagnoses the alienating potential of images and screens in *The Society of the Spectacle*, when he defines spectacle as the social relation between people mediated by images. Within the logic of the spectacle, this social relation is one of ubiquitous alienation, immobilization, and isolation.

This chapter investigates Debord's argument that when images saturate the lives of individuals who no longer consume real objects but their mere representations in post-industrial capitalism, the malign alienation (*Entfremdung*) that Karl Marx diagnosis in his early writings migrates from the realm of production to the realm of consumption.

⁴² Donald Kuspit, "Krzysztof Wodiczko at Galerie Lelong," *Artforum*, 1996, p. 106.

⁴³ Krzysztof Wodiczko, "Identity and Community: Alien Staff," *Critical Vehicles: Writings, Projects, Interviews*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, p. 116. Originally published as "Le Baton d'étranger: experience, identité et communauté," *Krzysztof Wodiczko: Art Public, Art Critique*, ed. Marie-Anne Sichère, Paris: Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1995.

Representations alienate, and alienation pervades. Under these conditions, *Alien Staff's* community-constructing potential becomes nearly illegible. The critique Wodiczko levels at contemporary society appears to be swallowed in the hyper-abundance of similar, televisual representations, and the attempt at defeating the alienation of the operator-immigrant using mediating equipment seems akin to the work of Fernand Léger, which Jonathan Crary criticizes for trying to outdo the spectacle at its own game.⁴⁴ This chapter attempts to discern whether and in what ways the screen in *Alien Staff* can be seen to heighten or reduce the operator-immigrant's sense of isolation, which leads to certain conclusions about whether and how *Alien Staff's* VDT becomes indistinguishable from the barrage of electronic images, which generally exacerbates the collective sense of social isolation.

While these theories of alienation threaten to neutralize Wodiczko's critique, the scale of Wodiczko's works distinguishes them, productively or not, from the media that Debord and Crary discuss. Beyond Wodiczko's designs for personal instruments, he uses large-scale projections in an attempt to break through the abundant forces of social alienation. By pushing his representations to their extreme largesse or intimately miniaturizing them, he may be capable to distinguish his projections and instruments from the surrounding profusion of images. Ultimately this chapter will argue that Wodiczko's work occupies the precarious space between critique and complicity. At moments his work seems capable to distinguish itself from a potentially totalizing logic of capital and spectacle, while at other times he shows his willingness to be absorbed by the complex networks of production and distribution of mass mediating forms that alienate people from the forces that constitute them as subjects and from one another.

⁴⁴ Jonathan Crary, "Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory," *October* 50, Autumn 1986, p. 106

The immigrant constituted as an individual of a certain political category of outsiders is intimately connected to national and international legislation that has in the past 30 years begun to recognize the complicated relationship between citizenships, nationalisms, and global economic conditions. As Lisa Lowe says about immigration, “the state attempts to control through law what is also an economically driven phenomenon,”⁴⁵ and thus if economic forces are different today from the time Debord was writing, this marks an important lacuna in our analysis that needs to be historicized. Ultimately the profound connection between the economy and the construction of immigrant subjects is an extremely important point of clarification for Wodiczko’s work.

Part 1: Capitalist Alienation, a Primer: Marx, Lukács, and Debord

The first significant analysis of alienation in modern society that concerns this thesis is Marx’s writings on labor in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* from 1844, in which he analyzes the effect of capitalist means of production on an individual’s relationship to his or her work. In the chapter entitled “Alienated Labor,” Marx defines objectification as labor’s natural materialization into the objects of production, which become alienated (*Entäußerung*) when the producer of an object sells (*Verausserung*) the product of his or her labor.⁴⁶

With the division of labor brought about by the advent of the assembly line, the worker becomes alienated (*Entfremdung*) from the object of his or her labor because in one instance he or she only repeatedly performs the same, small part component of the

⁴⁵ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: on Asian American Cultural Politics*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999, p. 20.

⁴⁶ Marx, Karl, *Marx: Early Political Writings*, trans. Joseph O’Malley and Richard A. Davis. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 42.

production of an object. Furthermore, he or she is no longer the individual selling the object. The product of an individual's labor becomes "a power independent of its producer," traded and exchanged according to the alien logic of the exchange economy. The alienation of labor objectified in an object intended to be sold shifts from the mere dissatisfaction of letting go of the product of one's toil, and becomes the malevolent force of alienation (*Entfremdung*) that is the condition of the proletarian worker under capitalism.⁴⁷

Labor ultimately becomes an object in its own right, reified with its own exchange value, such that the laborer is eventually forced to submit to the logic of capitalist means of production and consumption. His or her work ceases to be an activity for self-enrichment and labor itself becomes an alien force to which the worker must now submit. Georg Lukács explains this in "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" from *History and Class Consciousness* saying, "Subjectively—where the market economy has been fully developed—a man's activity becomes estranged from himself," he says. "It turns into a commodity which subject to the non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society, must go its own way independently of man just like a consumer article."⁴⁸ Furthermore, while the political economy is the product of humankind's economic activities, it too becomes an alien force with its own logic that humankind must now seek to understand.

The relationship between labor and alienation is important for an analysis of Wodiczko's work first because of the role labor plays in immigration law. Chapter 12 of

⁴⁷ Karl Marx, "The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," *Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence Simon, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994, p. 58.

⁴⁸ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), trans. Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971, p. 87.

Title 8 of the United States Code concerns aliens and immigrants to the United States of America and American territories abroad, and section 1101 outlines the legal definitions of the terms used in the discourse. “Alien” is any person who is not a citizen of the United States, while an immigrant is defined as an alien who does not qualify for nonimmigrant status, generally determined by lengths of stay, the political nature of his or her visits, and other mitigating factors. Additionally, family ties, political asylum, and *employment* are the three major categories of eligibility for immigrants seeking to obtain permanent residency permits (Green Cards) in the United States.⁴⁹ Except for familial bonds and political threats in their home states, individuals entering the United States legally or illegally almost always come for work, and these are generally the immigrants that can be assumed to have the most difficult time assimilating and integrating into their adopted countries. Immigrant laborers are undoubtedly the largest population of individuals for whom *Alien Staff* would be useful.

One of the first people to utilize *Alien Staff* was Jagoda Przybylak, a prominent Polish artist-photographer who moved to New York in 1981. In her interview with Tom Finkelpearl, she recounts harrowing stories of her first few years in the States, running from immigration officers while working various jobs in the service industry. In her performance with *Alien Staff*, she shares three stories of various jobs that are common to Polish immigrant women: “plejsy” (cleaning private apartments); “ofisy” (cleaning corporate offices); and “kopianiony” (accompanying elderly American women).⁵⁰ She

⁴⁹ Available at http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/8/usc_sup_01_8_10_12.html. Last visited April 18, 2010.

⁵⁰ Wodiczko, 1999, p. 105. “Voices of the *Alien Staff*” (1992-1996), from *Critical Vehicles* provides a selection of testimonies from performers. In these testimonies labor arises though not necessarily as a dominant theme. An anonymous person in Brooklyn talks about polishing silverware for upper class women, and Abdlekader N’Dali recounts his difficulties in a Peugeot factory.

says in her interview, “The end of this job was a visit from Immigration. This was still not official work. We were still without green cards. Immigration came. How afraid we were. This sort of thing could never happen when you worked for a family in a house.”⁵¹ The workers pushed one another out onto a fire escape in their blue uniforms and waited for hours to guarantee that it was safe to return. On one occasion a woman, weeks from getting married, was so fearful of deportation that she took off her blue uniform and stood in the damp cold only in her underwear.⁵²



Image 11: *Alien Staff*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, first generation, operated by Jagoda Przybylak, New York, 1992-1993. Courtesy Galerie Lelong.

Image 12 & 13: *Tijuana Projection*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, light projection, dimensions variable, performer unknown, Public video projection at the Centro Cultural Tijuana, Mexico, Organized as part of the event InSite 2000, 2001. Courtesy Galerie Lelong.

Since *Alien Staff*, Wodiczko has expressed further interest in the plight of laborers. In Tijuana in 2001, he projected live-feed videos of female *maquiladoras* (factory workers) onto the dome of the Imax Theater of El Centro Cultural. These women participated in a yearlong process in preparation for two three-hour public performances

⁵¹ Tom Finkelpearl and Jagoda Przybylak, “Interview: Jagoda Przybylak on *Alien Staff*,” *Dialogues in Public Art*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000, pp. 330-331.

⁵² Finkelpearl and Przybylak, 2000, p. 330.

and projections on February 23rd and 24th. Similar to performances with *Alien Staff* or *Mouthpiece*, *Tijuana Projection* required that the individuals rehearse their narratives in advance, and thus Wodiczko's ideal for a therapeutic quality to his work remains a key component. The laborers recount traumatic stories of domestic violence and abject working conditions, just as Jagoda narrated stories of her work, illegal in her case, as a cleaner and caretaker for the elderly. The live-feed technology then projects the operator's image onto the large dome of the Centro Cultural. Ideally, this projection engenders curiosity in the audience members, who proceed to engage in a dialogue with the performers, leading to greater understandings of the conditions these women face on a daily basis.⁵³

The artistic intent of Wodiczko's public pieces is to insert non-traditional narratives into the public sphere, which is dominated by ideologies of the ruling classes, ethnicities, and nationalities. While the critique of labor *per se* is not Wodiczko's interest, the subjects of his work are often laborers themselves, and Wodiczko's critique of the society that results in the necessity for certain individuals to immigrate is intimately related to a critique of global capitalism and the exploitation of labor. It is not my intention to argue that Marx's critique of alienated labor translates seamlessly as an objet of Wodiczko's critique. However, the subjects with whom he chooses to work are alienated to begin with, not merely politically as immigrants, but socially and personally

⁵³ It is important to note that the women who speak in *Tijuana Projection* are laborers producing goods, while aliens who enter foreign countries illegally for work, and even those immigrants who are granted permanent residence in countries legally, are often forced into the service sector. This is noteworthy since the relationship to the product of one's labor is different in both of these paradigms. In the service industry, labor is inherently alienated since the product of one's labor is always already the object of another's ownership.

in virtue of being legally and structurally separated from what is often their illicit labor in a foreign country.

** ** *

Debord draws on Lukács's notion of reification and argues that in the economic system of his time, changes in *consumption* that accompany the commodity's increasing colonization of private space lead to a paradigm shift in the configuration of alienation. The second section of *The Society of the Spectacle*, titled "The Commodity as Spectacle," says:

The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life... With the advent of the so-called industrial revolution, alienated consumption is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses... The total commodity must be returned in fragmentary form to a fragmentary individual completely cut off from the concerted action of the forces of production.⁵⁴

In this respect, the commodity as the object of consumption becomes, for Debord, an equally alienating force turning consumers into passive subjects with little to no agency in their own consumption.

We have already seen that Wodiczko defines *Xenology* as "the art and science of the stranger...the immigrant's art of survival,"⁵⁵ and Wodiczko believes that need rather than desire or exchange-value drives his interrogative design practice. It could appear that Wodiczko's instruments somehow resist market forces, but the primacy of their use-value does not mean that they withstand the totalizing logic of capitalism. As Debord says, "The spectacle is a permanent opium war waged to make it impossible to distinguish goods from commodities, or true satisfaction from a survival that increases according to its own logic. Consumable survival *must* increase, in fact, because it continues to

⁵⁴ Debord, (1967) 1995, p. 29.

⁵⁵ Wodiczko, 1999, p. 131.

enshrine deprivation. Survival itself belongs to the realm of dispossession: it may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it.”⁵⁶ Wodiczko is complicit in the logic of capitalism when he recognizes the need to constitute immigrants as a target consumer base in order for them to be taken seriously in contemporary society. “They operate tools or instruments designed for and with them. In this society, once there is a product designed for specific users they are taken seriously,” he says in an interview with Tom Finkelpearl.⁵⁷

That Wodiczko chooses immigrants and factory workers to operate his work is significant, and the historical relationship between labor and immigration requires further excavation in another project. The particular concept relevant to this thesis is the relationship between labor and the production of commodities at the point when the commodity completes its colonization of *social* life. It is no mere coincidence that Wodiczko is interested in the working class in a number of his projects, but what is significant in this next section is Debord’s analysis of the spectacle as a relationship between people mediated by images under the conditions of the totalizing logic of the commodity.

Part 2: Ideology and the Neutralization of Public Art

Art critic Donald Kuspit’s review of Wodiczko’s exhibition from 1996 is the only text that seriously indicates the possibility that Wodiczko’s work does not completely and

⁵⁶ Debord, (1967) 1995, p. 30. In 2003, Julika Rudelius composed a video concerning the ritualistic consumption habits of young immigrant men of Turkish and Moroccan decent living in the Netherlands. Asked to walk the interviewer through their wardrobe in a generic hotel room, these amateur sartorialists shuffle through dozens of articles of designer brand clothing occasionally interrupting their flaunts with explanations of the saving and sacrificing necessary to buy each €400+ object. Nothing speaks gilded poverty better than this image.

⁵⁷ Tom Finkelpearl, “Interview: Krzysztof Wodiczko on *Alien Staff*,” *Dialogues in Public Art: Interviews*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 2000. 340.

unproblematically pursue its ideal of improving the operator-immigrant's personal and social standing, implying that it might in fact exacerbate his or her condition. Though he does not offer any critical details about the risks associated with Wodiczko's use of technology, this skepticism underscores his hesitation at uncritically believing that these instruments escape traditional objections to technological progress and the alienating effects of technology under capitalism.⁵⁸ This collective "sense of isolation" by any other name is what in the modern period came to be known as the lonely crowd, and this social alienation underscores a second critical approach to Wodiczko's art that can be traced back to Marx's theories on social forces that create isolation and degrade the public space.

The loss of the public sphere and the forces of social alienation at work are the subjects of Marx's "On the Jewish Question." In his response to Bruno Bauer's *The Jewish Question* of 1843 Marx argues that the State is an ideological apparatus with the power to extend or deny political emancipation to individuals, and that liberal freedoms of political emancipation are independent from and, in his final analysis, antithetical to the more necessary *human* emancipation, which remains loosely defined in Marx's writing. Secularism does not entail freedom from religion in civil society but rather freedom of individuals from other individuals. Bauer is wrong to argue that the Jews

⁵⁸ For more on the alienating effects of technology under capitalism more broadly, see Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1982. Also, Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, Pt. 1: the Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. Stiegler is a Heideggerian technological theorist who suggests a reading of technology as being inherently prosthetic. In the myth of Epimetheus, when the Greek gods provided animals with various faculties, they forgot humankind, which was left naked, without a home, and unable to hunt. Since there is no essentially human technic except their ability to use tools, humans spend all their existence seeking for their essential faculties. This potential of technology to bring about the unconcealing of the essence of humankind is what Heidegger calls *poiesis*, however under capitalism, technology is stripped of this function and conceives of the entire world merely as standing reserve, as raw material to be converted into usable objects for humans.

must abandon their religious consciousness in order to be politically free, according to Marx. On the other hand, the emancipation of the State from religion or of religion from the State does not entail the destruction of religion, merely the freedom to practice religion privately and thus the separation between church and state. As Marx says:

Therefore, we do not, with Bauer, say to the Jews: you cannot be politically emancipated without radically emancipating yourselves from Judaism. Rather we tell them: because you can be politically emancipated without fully and definitively withdrawing yourself from Judaism, *political emancipation* itself is not *human* emancipation. If you Jews want to be politically emancipated without emancipating yourselves humanly, the imperfection and contradiction lies not only in you, it lies in the *essence* and the *category* of political emancipation.⁵⁹

There remains room for religious identities in a secular State, and the liberal values of the Western State *presupposes* religion in that its main function is to protect the rights of its citizens, such as those of religious freedoms. Political emancipation and liberal freedoms are divisive concepts, alienating individuals in society from one another. As Marx says, “But the human right of freedom is not based on the connection of man with man, but much more on the separation of man from man. It is the *right* of this separation, the right of the individual who is *limited* enclosed within himself.”⁶⁰ This is significant since liberal freedoms are ideological, meaning that they are in place to ensure the continued rule of the ruling discourse, which is that of capitalism in the case of Marx’s analysis of the political economy.

As individuals confront one another as representatives of alien forces, inherently partial and divided, society degrades from a community of citizens into a civil society.

“The sphere in which man functions as a communal being,” Marx says, “is degraded and subordinated to the sphere in which he functions as a partial being; finally, that it is not

⁵⁹ Marx, Karl. *Marx: Early Political Writings*, trans. Joseph O’Malley and Richard A. Davis. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 42.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

man as citizen, but man as bourgeois who is taken to be the *real* and *true* human being.”⁶¹ Furthermore, “the State” becomes a separate entity, beside and outside civil society, nothing more than a conglomeration of laws and institutions devised to ensure that the interests of the ruling class are indeed ruling in the guise of the “general interest.”

The liberal freedom to privately disagree guarantees the degradation of the public sphere as a shared place of dialogue and protest. The immigrant, as an outsider, is doubly alienated since his or her specific needs of political emancipation are entirely out of his or her control. Not only is the dynamic public sphere of a genuine community of people nonexistent, the ideology of the ruling classes that serve to fulfill and make universally appealing their needs, excludes those discourses that are incompatible with the ruling discourse, the particularized immigrant discourses especially. However, I am trying to demonstrate that Wodiczko is not exclusively interested in the immigrant as a broad category of individuals. Let us turn now to address the new paradigm of capitalist alienation. Since there are new models of power that rewrite this understanding.

Though not quite as well argued or straightforward as Marx’s “On the Jewish Question,” Debord’s remarks concerning the alienation definitive of the spectacle are relevant to Wodiczko’s art. In 1988, 20 years after the publication of his *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord revised certain of his notions in a book entitled *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle* where he observes:

For the agora, the general community, has gone, along with communities restricted to intermediary bodies or to independent institutions, to salons or cafés, or to workers in a single company. There is no place left where people can discuss the realities which

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from the crushing presence of media discourse and of the various forces organized to relay it.⁶²

Debord diagnoses the malaise in contemporary society as resulting from the dominance of independent forms of representation, and Wodiczko's work problematically shares certain formal qualities with the media that Debord criticizes. The problem at hand concerning Wodiczko's objects is how he can use art in the public sphere, especially art that employs video and televisual representations of immigrant individuals that may be formally indistinguishable from the media discourses of immigrants, to defeat the social alienation engendered by the social, political, and economic forces of contemporary, global capitalist societies. First let us begin by working through the contradictions inherent to Wodiczko's polemic against the ideological nature of the majority of public installations in contrast to his use of art in the public sphere.

* * * * *

On New Year's Eve 1984, Wodiczko projected images of a Soviet and an American cruise missile on each side of the Memorial Arch at Brooklyn's Grand Army Plaza, with chains uniting and locking them together at the top of the arch. This image of fate intertwined for these two political and military rivals, projected onto the public monument in the roundabout at the tip of Brooklyn's Prospect Park, is intended to insert a critical dimension to what Wodiczko argues is the intellectual stagnancy of most artistic collaborations within the public sphere.

The artist says that an agreement between Grand Army Plaza and the community board permits artistic interventions in the public space with the exclusion of events that

⁶² Debord, (1988) 2007, p. 19.

incorporate politics, thus any political dimension of his work had to be subtle. The community board considers public art to consist of “undisturbing but *spectacular* events or objects that will satisfy the community in an easy and immediate way.”⁶³ Wodiczko obliged at first, as he considers most administrative desires for art in public places to be good opportunities, but he injected the event with an unexpected critical dimension. By intervening on public monuments that inherently support the history of the victors, Wodiczko hopes to impute a critical consciousness on the otherwise politically passive audience of spectators in the public sphere.



Image 14: *Grand Army Plaza Projection*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, light projection, dimensions unknown, Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, New York, 1984/85.

Earlier in the same year as his *Grand Army Plaza Projections* (1984), Wodiczko published a polemic against public art entitled “Avant-Garde as Public Art: The Future of a Tradition” in which he outlines his ideas of what separates good and bad public

⁶³ Douglas Crimp, Rosalyn Deutsche, Ewa Lajer-Burchard, eds., “A Conversation with Krzysztof Wodiczko,” *October* 38, Autumn 1986, p. 24. Emphasis mine. This is an important point to highlight, since Wodiczko seems to be aware of the problem of the spectacle. Steve Mann at the University of Toronto, who makes work that turns the surveillance apparatus against itself, has acknowledged Wodiczko for telling him about the similarities between works like *Griefcase* (2000) and the Situationist technique of *détournement*. Wodiczko is evidently aware of Situationist literature, though its influence on his work is less likely.

installations. For an artist who creates works of art to be displayed in the public sphere, his comments should generate a great deal of curiosity. He says:

I must express my critical detachment from what is generally called 'art in public places.' This bureaucratic-aesthetic form of public legitimation may allude to the idea of public art as a social practice but in fact has very little to do with it. ...Such work functions at best as liberal urban decoration. To believe that the city can be affected by open-air public art galleries or enriched by outdoor curatorial adventures (through state and corporate purchases, lendings, and display) is to commit an ultimate philosophical and political error. For, since the eighteenth century at least, the city has operated as a grand aesthetic curatorial project, a monstrous public art gallery for massive exhibitions, permanent and temporary, of environmental architectural 'installations'; monumental 'sculpture gardens'; official and unofficial murals and graffiti, [etc.]. To attempt to 'enrich' this powerful, dynamic art gallery (the city public domain) with 'artistic art' collections or commissions—all in the name of the public—is to decorate the city with a pseudo-creativity that is irrelevant to urban space and experience alike.⁶⁴

Wodiczko never names artists or artworks that he would categorize under the term "bureaucratic-aesthetic." Is he talking about *Metronome* (1999) by Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginza, commissioned for Union Square by The Related Companies Real Estate Agency? An LED shows the time and counts down the minutes, seconds, and milliseconds remaining in a 24-hour day while the steel whirlpool emits steam from a gilded hole on the side of a building. Notably, the only time this LED diverged from its normal display was to count down until the day that the International Olympic Committee was set to announce the host city for the 2012 Summer Olympics, the grandest display of spectacular isolation when millions of people simultaneously stared into television screens around the world, watching and waiting to see what was going to transpire for their countrymen. There can be no greater example of Debord's claim: "The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as all of society, as a part of society, and as instrument of unification... it is the common ground of the deceived gaze and of false consciousness."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, p. 27.

⁶⁵ Debord, (1967) 1995, 12. This piece would definitely fall under this rubric of private interests in public aesthetic displays, and it could certainly be argued that such an artwork functions exclusively to



Image 15: *Metronome*, Kristen Jones and Andrew Ginzel, Union Square, New York, dimensions unknown, 1999.

Why did Wodiczko, writing this polemic in 1984, not feel the need to mention the raging legal battle surrounding Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981)? One hundred and twenty feet long and twelve feet high, this multi-ton steel sculpture imposed its presence in the Federal Plaza in New York from 1981 to '89 when it was removed by court order. *Arc* faced the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building as it cut across concentric circles of tile emanating from a fountain in the corner near the intersection of Worth and Federal Plaza, forming a wall or sorts for the buildings on the square. Almost immediately upon its installation, *Arc* evoked intense public animosity, and debate ensued between supporters and critics. In '85 Chief Judge Edward D. Re declared at the behest of the 58 people who

demonstrate the wealth, and thereby power, of a corporate or state institution. Furthermore, it should come as no surprise that Wodiczko has expressed strong interest in doing work in Union Square concerning the politics of space and the structural responsibility of real estate developers in the production of homelessness and gentrification. For more, see Rosalyn Deutsche, "Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Homeless Projection* and the Site of Urban Revitalization," *October* 38, Autumn 1986, pp. 63-98. Wodiczko never completed this projection in Union Square, but we can imagine how difficult it would be for a video or live-feed projection like the Grand Army Plaza Projection to break through the raucous.

testified in court that the sculpture must be removed. In the years immediately following, Serra appealed the decision, but in '89, federal workers finally removed the sculpture.

Regarding the judicial debates leading to the sculpture's removal, Rosalyn Deutsche notes:

Clearly it had been predetermined that the sculpture distracted from 'public use,' but this judgment assumed that definitions of 'public' and 'use' are self-evident. 'The public' was assumed to be a group of aggregated individuals unified by their adherence to fundamental, objective values or by their possession of essential needs and interests or, what amounts to the same thing, divided by equally essential conflicts. 'Use' referred to the act of putting space into the service of fundamental pleasures and needs. Objects and practices in space were held to be of 'public use' if they are uniformly beneficial, expressing common values or fulfilling universal needs.⁶⁶

Competing value systems and presuppositions about definitions of use and value, and the language and vocabulary defined by the different sides of the debate conflict irreconcilably in this case. The judge's language and assumed definitions logically lead to the conclusion that the sculpture must be removed. Rather than support a sculpture that creates divisive dialog, Judge Re decided to return the public space to its alienating ideological "neutrality," where individuals are permitted to confront each other partially, as representatives of different alien forces.

⁶⁶ Rosalyn Deutsche, "Tilted Arc and the Uses of Democracy," *Designing Cities: Critical Readings in Urban Design*, ed. Alexander Cuthbert, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003, p. 162. This is an incredibly rich source for analysis and comparison with Wodiczko's work, but in relationship to this thesis, such a digression would be too difficult to sufficiently. Rosalyn Deutsche has written extensively on the relationship between architectures of power and the work of both Wodiczko and Serra, and for further reading on this topic, my bibliography should be a valuable resource.



Image 16: *Tilted Arc*, Richard Serra, sculpture, weathered steel, 12 ft x 120 ft x 2.5 in, installed New York (destroyed 1989), collection: General Services Administration, Washington, D.C. 1981.

Image 17: *Tilted Arc*, Richard Serra, sculpture, weathered steel, 12 ft x 120 ft x 2.5 in, installed New York (destroyed 1989), collection: General Services Administration, Washington, D.C. 1981.

This is the discursive identity that Wodiczko hopes can be the model for a new community: the production of a space where dialogue can exist around his instruments and public projections. The loss of the public sphere where discourse is permitted to rule (what Wodiczko traces back to the Greek *polis* and the public discourse of *parrhesia* practiced by the Cynics) is the consequence of, among other things, liberal freedoms that permit individuals to live private lives where their beliefs and dispositions are protected from disagreement in the public sphere.

Parrhesiastic speech is necessary, he argues for a functioning democracy, and the loss of the public sphere, which is one among many forms of alienation discussed thus far, is the consequence of the material conditions of capitalism that constructs subjects always already alienated from others in the public space of civil society. What is at stake for Wodiczko's work is whether or not it is possible to determine an ontological distinction between critical and non-critical art in the public sphere. While public sculptures are complicit enough in the ideological sphere, to add screens and VDTs to art

carries its own risks of being entirely ineffectual and unrecognizable as public interventions in societies dominated by screens and the consumption of images.

Part 3: Spectacle and Screen: Concrete Homogenizations

Wodiczko is aware of the deterioration of the public sphere, but his artistic project more broadly is to produce spaces where individuals can participate in their own governance through critical activities and the renewal of a space of public discourse. This thesis is not concerned with his interest to restore the public sphere; rather we must specifically interrogate the function and feasibility of screens in public art as a way to prevent the neutralization of Wodiczko's public art and to propose models for new communities. This is a particularly potent concern in the contemporary economic paradigm following Debord's analysis of the society of the spectacle. As Debord says:

The spectacle's function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation. Economic growth corresponds almost entirely to the growth of this particular sector of industrial production. If something grows along with the self-movement of the economy, it can only be the alienation that has inhabited the core of the economic sphere from its inception.⁶⁷

Jonathan Crary's discerning work is important for determining how this paradigm has shifted.

In 1984 the same year as Wodiczko's *Grand Army Plaza Projection*, Brian Wallis published an anthology of critical essays entitled *Art After Modernism* with the New Museum of Contemporary Art. In "Eclipse of the Spectacle" from this collection, Crary demonstrates Debord's claim that the new paradigm of the political economy is intimately connected with the contemporary developments of televisual technologies and the VDT's total occupation of social life. He argues that the Debordian paradigm of

⁶⁷ Debord, (1967) 1995, p. 23.

the spectacle that dominated in the 1960s can no longer be said to exist. The increasing abstraction and dematerialization of commodities and their consumption as images have advanced to such a point that there is nothing outside the totalizing logic of advanced, global capitalism. In his words, capitalism is at a stage “where liquidity no longer spawns the nomadic or the fugitive...[and] the passive consumption of images that characterized the sixties is over.”⁶⁸ Images and the commodity have reached a new degree of alien power, and the VDT, of which the display screen on Wodiczko’s instruments is a prime example, “imposes a highly articulated, *coercive* apparatus, a prescriptive mode of activity and corporal regimentation.”⁶⁹

In what might turn into the most critical objection to Wodiczko’s use of the VDTs, Crary remarks: “Most often advocacy of ‘alternative’ uses of telecommunications and computers goes hand in hand with a naïve belief in the neutrality of digital languages and a blindness to the immanence of binary notation within a specific system of technocratic domination.”⁷⁰ In stark contrast to Wodiczko’s aim of reconstructing the human subject, following a critique of the alien forces that constitute individuals as subjects, with the use of screens, the logic of independent representation dematerializes information, equating, to a certain extent, the independent images on televisions to images on cinema screens to images on billboards. The content of the message is no longer important, but merely the act and medium of communication. Under this paradigm, a screen on Wodiczko’s *Alien Staff* may be

⁶⁸ Crary, (1984) 1992, p. 293. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on the nomad in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia Vol. 1 and 2*, and *Nomadology: The War Machine*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1986. For a commentary on the limitations of the nomadic model of resistance, see Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*, London: Routledge, 2003.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 293. (emphasis mine)

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

indistinguishable as independent representation from a screen overhead that advertises for a commodity. What we will discover later is that Wodiczko's *Alien Staff*, insofar as it is in the public sphere, is *not* a form of independent representation, thus the possibility remains, however slight, of resisting the totalizing logic of Crary's updated reading of the society of the spectacle.

Debord makes a similar point in *Society of the Spectacle* when he argues that technological apparatuses are anything but neutral. He says, "If the spectacle—understood in the limited sense of those 'mass media' that are its most stultifying superficial manifestation—seems at times to be invading society in the shape of mere *apparatus*, it should be remembered that this apparatus has nothing neutral about it, and that it answers precisely the needs of the spectacle's internal dynamics."⁷¹ Technology is not neutral, but Wodiczko betrays his own naïve belief that he can employ technology without resolving the immanent conflicts it poses for his work.

Crary argues that the paradigm shift from Debord's society of the spectacle, where an aura existed around the materiality of the commodity, consists of the increasing move towards pure surface and the absolute homogenization of everything that "drifts across the screen of either television or home computer." The definitive example of this neutrality and homogenization of images is Nam June Paik's projection *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1984). Disseminated on network television, the piece was "indistinguishable from the adjacent flow" of images and information. For its visibility, Crary argues, the work depended on its simultaneous projection at The Kitchen in New York. "Video art, paradoxically, depends for its intelligibility on its isolation from television. It can only

⁷¹ Debord, (1967) 1995, p. 19.

exist in the cloister of the gallery-museum space, or wherever the video monitor claims autonomy and independence from major networks of distribution.”⁷²

Crary does not conduct a serious formal analysis of this piece, but merely notes that in the context of television, Nam June Paik’s work cannot break through the neutralizing, alienating formal structures of network television. More succinctly, “The disciplinary apparatus of digital culture poses a self-sufficient, self-enclosed structure without avenues of escape.”⁷³ We have certainly arrived at a point where the “major networks of distribution” are no longer self-enclosed, and even the possibility of a delineated space independent of these networks of distribution has now evaporated.⁷⁴

The correlation between *Tijuana Projection* and *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* is not precise, but based on the previous analysis, this comparison may be more compelling than relating Wodiczko’s projections to Serra’s *Tilted Arc* or Jones and Ginzil’s *Metronome*. Unlike the two sculptures in the public space, Wodiczko’s projection has formal similarities with video art. It is an image projected on a background, and in this case, Wodiczko even recognizes the significance that his work is projected onto the roof of an Imax theater. He has taken the apparatus and the projected image outside of the cinema space and seeks to interrupt the urban landscape by radically magnifying its scale.

Cinematic darkness envelops the audience, and Wodiczko defends the night projections, arguing that this is a necessary condition of their visibility. Wodiczko’s darkness is qualitatively different from that of the cinema whose primary consequences

⁷² Crary, (1984) 1992, p. 289.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

⁷⁴ An expanded analysis of this phenomenon and its effects on art could include the work of other artistic interventions such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s billboard installations in New York, Barbara Kruger’s appropriation of the semantics of advertisement to subvert the consumerist ploys of corporate powers, Jenny Holzer’s use of light-emitting diode (LED) screens.

include the concrete manufacture of the atomized consumption of moving images. This is not to say that the darkness does not alienate the audience in Wodiczko's projections, but merely demonstrates that the piece totters on the border between the recognizable critique and neutralization by the counter-intuitive equation with the adjacent flow of information passing over the screen on the underbelly of Tijuana's El Centro Cultural.



Image 18: *Tijuana Projection*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, light projection, dimensions variable, performer unknown, Public video projection at the Centro Cultural Tijuana, Mexico, Organized as part of the event InSite 2000, 2001. Courtesy Galerie Lelong.

The possibility for social interactions around *Tijuana Projection* is complicated by both its formal similarities to other moving images that constitute the spectacle, as well as the general neutralization of public art as analyzed in the previous section of this chapter. What distinguishes it formally from the screens in the public sphere is its magnitude. On the other hand, at one moment Wodiczko betrays his critique by directly occupying network television with *Alien Staff*. The problem that the new economic paradigms of consumption and production pose seriously threatens Wodiczko's work

when he boasts to Christiane Paul of his being invited onto a talk show to discuss *Alien Staff*. Of this occasion, Wodiczko says:

I was invited to explain the project on a television program, which makes a lot of sense since I think that the mainstream media should become an extension of my “small” media where the operator or speaker works together with the monitor. I had asked the operators to come to the television station with their equipment, so you had both the speakers and their small screens and the show’s host on the television screen. The program was a talk show, and because of a number of coincidences—festivals, events, problems with immigrants or skinheads—it made national news and everything was connected. Without this little piece of equipment none of this would have happened. Mass media picked it up because it already was media.⁷⁵

“Everything was connected,” Wodiczko says, as if professing his belief that this is the logical conclusion and the completion of the logic of *Alien Staff*. If the instrument is already media, then the mediated representation creates a cyclical, mis-en-abîme of screens, with each one indistinguishable from the other. It becomes impossible to differentiate the representation of the immigrant on the VDT of the staff from the adjacent barrage of information.

Certainly none of “it” would have happened without the *Alien Staff*, but it seems these events amount to very little. Wodiczko risks the complete and absolute submission of the specificity and particularity of the immigrant narrative represented on the screen to any hypothetically adjacent representations of generalized immigrant narrative, which are the major alien forces that constructs his immigrant-operators as geo-politically, socially, and legally alienated subjects against their will. Bringing his instrument onto network television, I would argue, is a self-defeating move from its conception.

Today, it is not merely the presence of mediated discourses that is problematic for the immigrant, but the ubiquity of identities predetermined by the alien forces of independent forms of representation. In the society of the spectacle as manifest today,

⁷⁵ Paul, 1999, p. 37.

immigrants are always already constituted as subjects without regard for the specificity of their narratives due to the asymmetrical ratio of mediated representations of immigrants to specific immigrant's narratives. Any hypothetical adjacent and independent representation of immigrants on network television stands in stark opposition to Wodiczko's artistic intent, but in the context of network television, they become indistinguishable from one another. Wodiczko has defeated his own desire to particularize the operator-immigrant's video history.

In this logic, an immigrant in the public space is not an individual but rather a representative of what has become the alien force of the generalized immigrant narrative; he or she has become a simulacrum of the abstract ideal type of immigrant *qua* alienated subject always already constructed by media discourses. The particularization of the immigrant narrative becomes impossible in the context of a talk show because there is nothing for the audience to distinguish this encounter with an immigrant on television from any other.

Furthermore, the talk show consists of commodified, spectacular therapy and self-help that reinforces the problem of the commodity status of Wodiczko's instrument, and the difference between its heuristic function and the practical implication of the *Alien Staff* as a prototype. This performance becomes indistinguishable from any other shameless act of self-promotion that occurs on talk shows on a daily basis, and the circumstances that turned the object into a nightly news phenomenon completely debases the instrument into utter spectacle.

The mediated consumption of the *Alien Staff* as pure representation via network television destroys rather than completes its logic and genuinely turns Wodiczko's work

into an attempt to try to out-spectacularize the spectacle. This is almost the same condition that Nam June Paik's projection of *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* faces in 1984, when it required the projection in a gallery space to be perceived as art.⁷⁶ This adage reveals the utter technological, design, and media idealism that the artist demonstrates throughout his work and his writing. His naïve proclamation of the completed logic of his media devices in the talk show exhibits an instance of his attempt to defeat spectacle with spectacle, similarly to Fernand Léger, whom Crary criticizes saying:

Léger's goal is the same: wanting to win over that public. Of course, he is writing at a point of uncertainty about the direction of his own art, facing the dilemma of what a public art might mean, but the confused program he comes up with in this text is an early instance of the ploys of all those—from Warhol to today's so-called simulationists—who believe, or at least claim, they are outwitting the spectacle at its own game. Léger summarizes this kind of ambition: 'Let's push the system to the extreme,' he states, and offers vague suggestions for polychroming the exterior of factories and apartment buildings, for using new materials and setting them in motion. But this ineffectual inclination to outdo the allure of the spectacle becomes complicit with its annihilation of the past and fetishization of the new.⁷⁷

It is important to remember that the spectacle and the economic conditions of alienated consumption are not Wodiczko's main interlocutors. If he is interested as I argue in exploring the conditions of the operator-immigrant's construction as a subject by alien forces (up to and including the economy), however, the technologically mediating conditions of his instruments ought to pose concerns for us. The conditions of the political economy that constitute the immigrant as an alien subject constructed by alien forces, in the sense that I am exploring, are the same as those that produce the various forces of alienation in contemporary society that this chapter has already discussed.

⁷⁶ The only thing I can imagine that might distinguish Wodiczko's piece from the adjacent spectacle on network television is the very difference that can be drawn between it and *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*. While Paik broadcast *only* the image, an independent representation, Wodiczko brings the apparatus itself onto the television set. Much more research would be necessary to make any definitive claims about Wodiczko's piece. I am not convinced, however, that Crary would think it different were Paik's video piece projected onto network television *as an apparatus*. Had this network projection consisted of an image of a television projecting the video, the comparison with Wodiczko's piece would have worked better.

⁷⁷ Jonathan Crary, "Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory," *October* 50, Autumn 1986, p. 106

The next chapter entertains a transformation in the logic of alienation that combats its malignancy and ideally produces healthy conditions that engender the possibility of critique. By way of this analysis it will become apparent that the reproduced images in Wodiczko's large-scale public projections like *Tijuana Projection* or in small screens of *Alien Staff*, are not the objects of contemplation, in contrast to the spectacle where the image of the dematerialized commodity becomes the object of consumption. On the other hand, Wodiczko uses techniques of alienation inherited from Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* that encourage the audience to contemplate the conditions that have rendered the dramatic social mediation necessary. Wodiczko seeks to alienate the individual from the represented images in various ways that permit the deidentification of the immigrant not only from his or her video history but also from the generalized media discourse concerning immigration that influences his or her constitution as a subject by alien forces. This in turn allows for the possibility of critiquing the economic and social conditions that force people to migrate and that are part of a much grander apparatus of production and consumption, wherein the logic of the spectacle reigns supreme.

Chapter 3: The Critical Alienation of the Theater

Our representations must take second place to what is represented, men's life together in society and the pleasure felt in their perfection must be converted into the higher pleasure felt when the rules emerging from life in society are treated as imperfect and provisional. In this way, the theater leaves its spectators productively disposed even after the spectacle is over.⁷⁸

—Bertolt Brecht

In the available critical literature on Krzysztof Wodiczko's public interventions, scholars regularly cite, though regularly pass over in footnotes, the relationship between his work and the German epic theater most famously pioneered by Bertolt Brecht. Mark Rakatansky provides the only extensive investigation of the theatrical dimension of Wodiczko's work in general. By demonstrating that Wodiczko borrows significantly from the theatrical innovations of the Weimar Republic, Rakatansky provides a better understanding of this artist's political and aesthetic predispositions and suggests a rereading of the productive intersection of theater and the visual arts. This chapter reinterprets a number of Wodiczko's pieces that Rakatansky analyzes, focusing specifically on their place in the analysis already provided of the numerous forms of alienation that Wodiczko's work navigates.

With his slide and video projections on public monuments and his personal instruments, Wodiczko employs theatrical techniques in the streets that deliberately seek to produce the alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) of Brecht's pioneering theater to produce circumstances that facilitate the audience's and the operator's contemplation of the social and political circumstances that have necessitated his interventions. Brecht does not provide the earliest foray into alienation or estrangement techniques, but his theory on the practice is certainly the most exhaustive.

⁷⁸ Brecht, 1964, p. 205.

Wodiczko treats the subjects of his art with all due respect to the particularities of their identities, yet this chapter will demonstrate that the operators are also not the focus of his work, in much the same way as their stories they present cannot seriously be considered his main interlocutor. As argued in the first chapter on the prosthetic impulse, Wodiczko is not interested in deconstructing human subjectivity as an end in itself or in highlighting his operator-subjects as victims through publicly acknowledging their often humiliating and traumatizing experiences. He is interested instead in what Brecht calls the “changeover from representation to commentary” that ideally transforms otherwise politically muted artworks into critical vehicles.⁷⁹ Wodiczko’s work brings into focus the conditions under which his subjects subsist, constituting a critical theatricality to produce an environment within which his audiences may educate themselves about these conditions and everyone’s mutual complicity in their production.⁸⁰ However, in the familiar words of Karl Marx, Wodiczko’s approach is not that of a philosopher offering yet another interpretation of reality for us to consider, reconsider, and critique; he is a critical artist seeking to provide the opportunity for his audiences and subjects to participate in transforming the social and political conditions of the world.

Rakatsky’s analysis specifically interrogates what he calls the disfiguring and refiguring of the social gest in the public projections; yet, he never mentions the interchange between the street and the stage that I am arguing is a productive component of my analysis. This chapter investigates Brecht’s use of screens in his epic theater and

⁷⁹ “A critical vehicle is, therefore, a medium; a person or thing acting as a carrier for displaying or transporting vital ingredients and agents. It is set to operate as a turning point in collective or singular consciousness. It transmits those ideas and emotions that are indispensable to the comprehension of the urgency and complexity of a situation.” Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles*, 1999, p. xvi.

⁸⁰ I would like to acknowledge John Rajchman for introducing me to the phrase “critical theatricalities” in his eponymous colloquium at Columbia University. “Critical theatricalities” is understood to signify artistic methods of critique informed by theatrical practices in direct contradistinction to Michael Fried’s claim that art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater.

Wodiczko's public projections to argue that the latter's works suggest artistic innovations regarding the use of projected images in socially committed work. Whereas Brecht uses the new innovations inherited from early cinema to alienate the theatrical stage and facilitate the communication of his didactic messages, Wodiczko adopts theatrical techniques adopted from Brecht's epic theater and transforms them for a street performance that ideally empowers its user to participate in their own self-constitution as a subject.

The conditions in contemporary society against which Wodiczko is responding that have undergone historical changes since the 1920s and 30s by social, political and economic forces, and thus only an analysis sensitive to these changes can offer a critical interrogation of Wodiczko's work. Just as it was necessary in the previous chapter to update Debord's notion of the spectacle to make it relevant to today's climate, Wodiczko cannot be understood as a merely a culmination or logical conclusion of Brecht's theatrical ideals. Rather he represents the inherent interpenetrability between real life and stage productions. The most productive analysis of this interchange will require contending with the differences between the climate of the Weimar Republic and of today's Western, liberal democracies.

Part I: Brecht, Screens, and Alienation of the Stage

When Brecht seeks to turn the theater into a critical vehicle for a Communist reinterpretation of reality, he suggests that the street demonstration and his epic theater might exchange techniques, absorbing and transforming one another's means of representation. The street demonstration, he argues, embodies certain, matter-of-fact

narrative techniques that the theater can adopt and employ. “Demonstration” here does not refer to political unrest, though protests and citizens embattled in the fights for emancipation are often the subjects of his works. It signifies, rather, the retelling of a mundane story outside of the framing structure of the formal theater. An individual in the street who recounts how a car nearly missed hitting a pedestrian, for example, employs different strategies to demonstrate his or her story than those typically employed in the classical, Aristotelian theater. What Brecht identifies as the significant difference between the theater and the street demonstration, which he hopes to adopt as a key structural component for his epic theater, is the interruption that breaks the illusion of representation and allows for the possibility of critique. As Brecht says:

The direct changeover from representation to commentary that is so characteristic of the epic theater is still more easily recognized as one element of any street demonstration. Wherever he feels he can the demonstrator breaks off his imitation in order to give explanations. The epic theatre’s choruses and documentary projections, the direct addressing of the audience by its actors, are at bottom just this.⁸¹

This quote frames Brecht’s use of screens as one component of his more general technique of the alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), which will recur with greater analysis later. Light projection on the stage of Brecht’s epic theater ideally prevent the full immersion in the story of the play and provide the opportunity for the theater to present an element of commentary in the production. In the 1920s, audiences were unaccustomed to the presence of screens on the stages of theaters, and Brecht’s use of these technical innovations plays a key component in alienating the audiences from the representation on stage.

The year 1927 was particularly fruitful for screens and light projections in the theater. In this year Erwin Piscator directed *Hoppla, wir leben!* (Hoppla, we’re alive!) by

⁸¹ Brecht, 1964, p. 126.

German playwright Ernst Toller at his Piscator-Bühne Theater in Berlin with sets designs by Traugott Müller that included light projections as a narrative supplement to the inherently limited theatrical stage.⁸² That same year, Brecht, and his regular collaborator, Kurt Weil, staged their *Mahagonny-Songspiel* at the Baden-Baden music festival, which consisted of the five “Mahagonny Songs” and one unpublished piece, “Poem on a Dead Man,” performed in a boxing ring in front of projections that their friend and collaborator Caspar Neher designed.⁸³

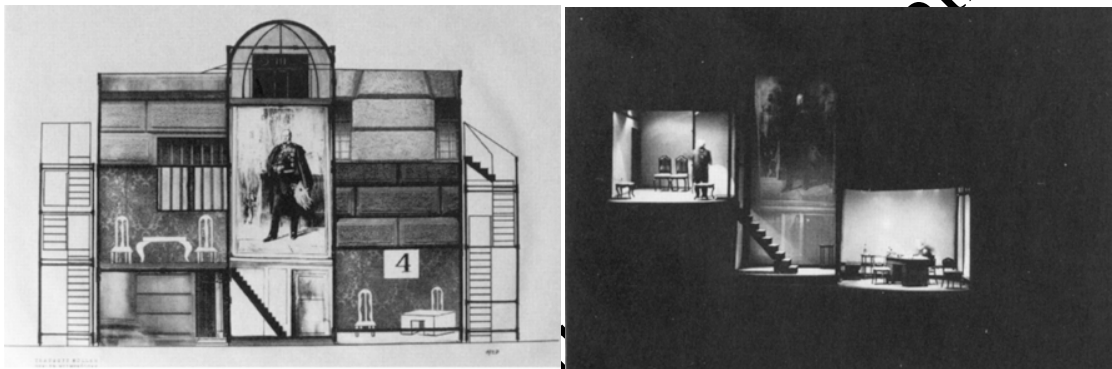


Image 19: Bühnenbildentwürfe zu *Hoppla, wir leben!* Traugott Müller von Ernst Toller, Piscator-Bühne, Berlin, 1927.

Image 20: *Hoppla, wir leben!*, Szenenbilder (teilweise mit Projektionen), Ernst Toller, Piscator-Bühne, Berlin, 1927, (Fotos: Hans Böhm).

The image above on the right is a production photograph from Piscator’s staging, and on the left is Müller’s sketch for the design, with a photograph collated where the projection is to appear on stage. The technical developments of cinema, when included in a theatrical production, provide the opportunity for the inclusion of various temporal and spatial dimensions to occupy the same stage, much like editing techniques in film such as montage allow for the manipulation of time and space in the cinema. Various throughout the play, stage instructions indicate moments of what Toller describes as

⁸² Cecil Davies offers an extensive stage history of this play in *The Plays of Ernst Toller, A Revaluation*, Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1996, pp. 311-354.

⁸³ Bertolt Brecht, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, ed. John Willet and Ralph Manheim, trans. W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman, New York: Arcade Publishing, 1996, p. ix.

“cinematographic interludes” between certain scenes, during which time various events play out on the screens on stage. For example, following the “cinematographic prelude” that opens the production, there is a projection of several scenes from the years 1919-1927 on a screen, including the 1919 Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I, the ’20 stock exchange uneasiness in New York, German inflation of ’23, and the death of Lenin in ’24. These scenes of madness mark the passing years between the play’s prelude and the opening act. They indicate not only how much time has elapsed between the two scenes, which reinforces the disunity of theatrical time, but they also cast a pall over the mood of the play by highlighting the economic and political climate that has developed in the intervening years.

Brecht’s *Mahagonny-Songspiel*, staged at Baden-Baden during the same year, is a short, early version of what later became the *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, (*The Rise and Fall of the City Mahagonny*), a moral tale about the role of greed and capitalism in the downfall of a young city. Brecht argues that the economic forces at the root of the development of the City of Mahagonny necessarily entail its ruination, arguing that the capitalist economic system is formally and structurally flawed.

The image below shows a rehearsal photograph from the staging of *Mahagonny Songspiel* at Baden-Baden, with the boxing ring filled with four men, with two women clothed in what appears to be lingerie kneeling to the left.⁸⁴ The projection at the back of the stage shows a man with a bowler hat superimposed on a cityscape, legs crossed, fingers clasped. Behind him to the left and on both sides hang gender-ambiguous

⁸⁴ *The Rise and Fall of the City Mahagonny*, which underwent numerous rewrites, retains the boxing ring in a scene from the second act when Alaska Wolf Joe, a friend of the protagonist Jim Mahoney, dies by a blow in a boxing match with Trinity Moses, an escaped convict responsible for establishing Mahagonny with two other criminals. This scene greatly assists in the demonization of the bourgeois individual.

individuals, lynched on lampposts and gallows. It appears that what Michael Schwaiger has identified to be a sketch from Neher's notebooks, executed in approximately 1930, is similar to the projected image at this staging at Baden-Baden. Slight differences are visible, but the basic content remains the same. The man in the sketch is unambiguously bourgeois, as evidenced by his suit, striped socks, and shoes as well as the flower in his lapel and his pocket square.



Image 21
(above):
Mahagonny
(Songspiel),
von Bertolt
Brecht und
Kurt Weil,
rehearsal
photograph,
Baden-Baden,
1927.



Image 22:
(below)
Projektionsentwurf zu
*Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt
Mahagonny*, Caspar Neher
von Bertolt Brecht und
Kurt Weil, Tusche und
Aquarell auf Papier, 32.6
X 38.7 cm, Neus Theater
(Oper), Leipzig 1930.

Brecht employs the screen on stage to communicate the play's didactic message, which sets it apart from Toller's play in Piscator's production. The projection of an image of an enlarged bourgeois man, undisturbed by the bodies hanging from gallows to his left and right, entails a deliberate moral message. The man is constructed as a murderous, selfish beast controlling the entirety of a city by exploiting the weaknesses and addictions of individuals such as gambling, smoking, drinking, and prostitution, all in the name of self-interest. In Neher's color drawing, the red eyes are haunting. The audience in attendance of these plays is intended to understand that capitalism plays a significant role in the demise of the city of Mahagonny, and that capitalism *necessarily* leads to these consequences due to its flaws as an economic system.

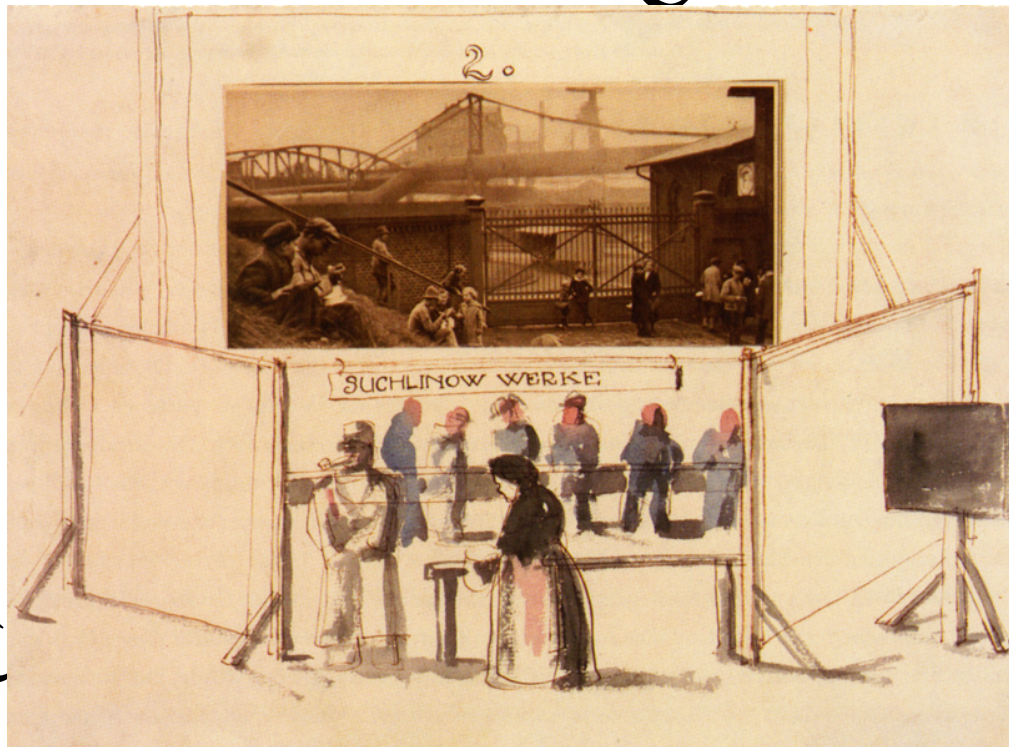


Image 23: Bühnenbildentwurf zu *Die Mütter*, Bertolt Brecht nach Maxim Gorki, Collage auf Papier, 22.6 X 31.1 cm, Komödienhaus a, Schiffbauerdamm, Berlin 1932.

Additionally, Brecht uses screens to break the illusion of representation of the theater. In much the same way as the collaged image of workers on lunch break outside a

factory interrupts Neher's drawing of the stage he designed for a production of Brecht's *Die Mütter*, above, the screen on the theatrical stage pushes the epic theater into a new medium, interrupting the illusion of representation, and jolting the audience from the immersive, empathetic experience typical of Aristotelian theater. Since stage productions are fundamentally reproductions of prewritten narrative using real people before a live audience, the insertion of a screen or projection pushes the stage in the direction of cinema. Projections communicate that the performance is not real, or at least no more real or representative than the projections behind the actors on stage. The psychic dissonance leads the audience, unaccustomed to screens in a theatrical performance, to interrogate the intervention and the conditions that necessitate it with the hope that they feel compelled to do their part to change those conditions by joining the Communist Party.

* * * *

According to Rakatansky's extensive analysis, Wodiczko uses the projected image to alienate social gestures, which Brecht defines as "the realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another...Physical attitude, tone of voice, and facial expression are all determined by a social gesture."⁸⁵ By alienating a social gesture, Wodiczko can highlight its role in constructing certain types of subjects and expose it in the public space for critique. These public projections interrupt the urban landscape, producing montages combining an image from the ruling discourse, such as public monuments or the buildings of grand institutions, with an image that challenges or critiques the authority of those institutions. Rakatansky offers compelling formal analyses of certain projections, such as *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (1981), for which Wodiczko projected a pair of French-cuffed hands embracing to solidify a deal directly onto the marble-inlaid

⁸⁵ Brecht, 1964, p. 198.

word “INSTITVTE” of the Rogers Building, MIT’s oldest edifice and now home the School of Architecture. Isolating the deal-making handshake, often sequestered to the privacy of back rooms, Wodiczko’s projection at M.I.T. highlights the private interests at work in the decision-making processes of large institutions. The montage pushes the projection from the realm of mere representation into the purview of commentary. By rendering visible the back-room deal, Wodiczko seeks to allow his audience to contemplate the meaning of the gesture, rather than the purely formal characteristics of light projections on buildings at night.

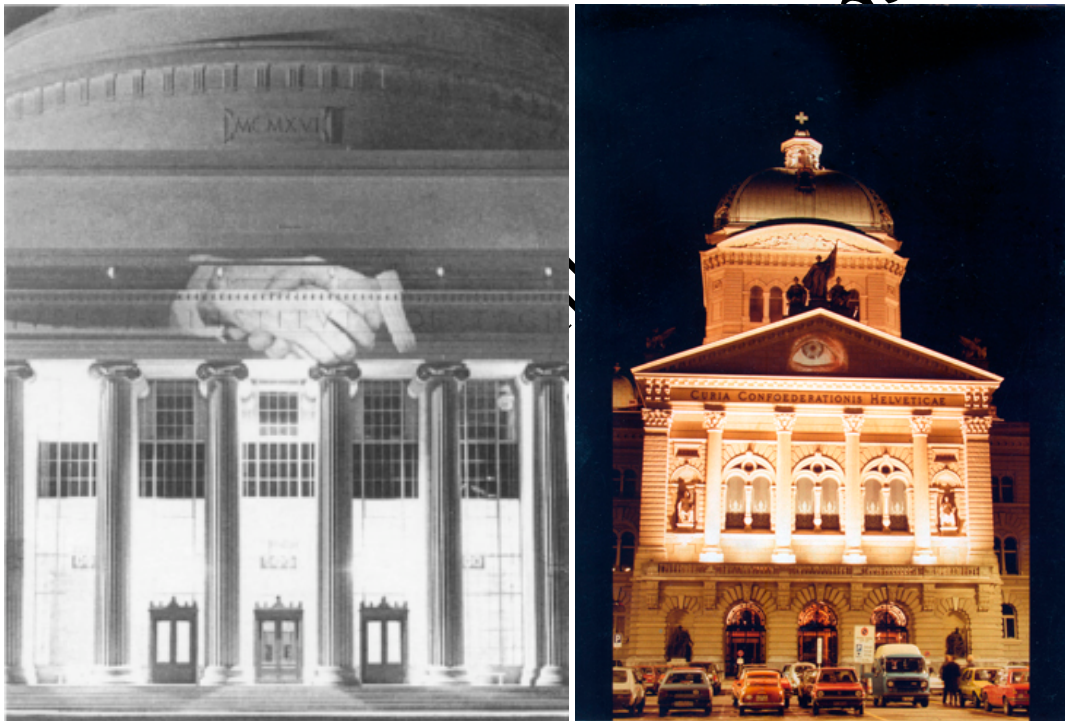


Image 24: *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, light projection, dimensions variable, Cambridge, Mass., 1981.

Image 25: *Bundeshaus Projection*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, light projection, dimensions variable, Swiss National Parliament Building, Bern, Switzerland, Organized by the Kunstmuseum of Bern, 1985. Courtesy Galerie Lelong.

With *Bundeshaus* (1985), which is nothing more than a single eye gazing out from the Berne Parliament in Switzerland, Wodiczko turns a human body part into a representative of the surveillance apparatus, putting the government and the banking

institutions under scrutiny. “The eye looks this way (toward the national bank) and that way (toward the Canton bank) and now this way (toward the city bank) and now that way (down at the parking lot in front of the parliament, under which lies the ‘national vault containing the Swiss gold’).”⁸⁶ In this projection the single eye is sufficient to evoke a realm of attitudes between people. Once isolated and projected onto a building in such a large scale, the eye becomes the gaze of surveillance, well within the realm of the social gest. The subtlety of his message portrayed in this medium is in part due to the politics of the public sphere, but it is also evidently a matter scale. In one sense, the message is contained in the medium of projected images on public monuments.

The eye is not synecdochic for the human body but the body politic and the role of surveillance in constituting a certain type of civilian subject. Once projected onto this building, the eye represents the mechanism of surveillance turned back on its analogized perpetrators: the government, big banks, etc.⁸⁷ The conceptual similarities of this analysis with another projection where Wodiczko expresses more critical interest in the role of surveillance and the social gaze in constructing *immigrant* subjects will facilitate a transference of these observations to an analysis of *Alien Staff*.

In 2005, Wodiczko renewed his interest in alienating the social, xenophobic gaze at Galerie Lelong in a projection entitled *If You See Something...* (2005). Amongst other

⁸⁶ Mark Rakavinsky, “Krzysztof Wodiczko: Disfiguring—Refiguring,” *Assemblage* 23, April 1994, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, p. 22.

⁸⁷ Steve Mann, a researcher and teacher at the University of Toronto and an acquaintance of Wodiczko, has completed artistic projects with similar goals of critiquing surveillance society in mind. Rather than working on the symbolic level, however, Mann literally reverses the gaze. In *Griefcase* (2000), Mann equipped a regular briefcase with fingerprint recognition technology programmed to permit anyone but the bearer of the object to open it. He placed a camera in the case, which began recording and transmitting its video data to an offsite backup facility as soon as someone opened it. When he carried the object into an airport and was asked to show what he was carrying in the case, he showed the TSA employee that it was impossible to open it. The security officer would then place his or her fingers on the thumbprint scanner and open the case, which would then document the individual who stands in as a representative of the surveillance apparatus. There is significant overlap with Wodiczko’s work, but this is best left for another project.

things, this piece explores the role of post-9/11 anxiety in the United States in constructing a culture of fear that exponentially exacerbates xenophobias and constitutes each foreign-looking or foreign-sounding individual as the object of a critical, suspicious gaze. Trompe l'oeil projections of depersonalized shadows and profiles of individuals cover each of the walls, while a soundtrack plays English spoken in thick accents. "In one vignette, a man talks about his despair over unending deportation proceedings that have kept him from his family for five years. In another, a woman with a European accent explains that her Lebanese husband has returned to his native country, forsaking his marriage because of interminable harassment."⁸⁸ The installation brings the social circumstances of foreigners into the gallery, alienating them from their surrounding context in order to provide a distance from the individuals displayed. This shifts the installation from merely representing the plight of foreigners to engendering the possibility, as Wodiczko ideally hopes, of commentary and critique that ultimately leads to personal changes in the individuals who visit his installation.



Images 26 & 27: *If You See Something...*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, 4 high-resolution video projectors, 4 computers, 5-channel sound installation, Each projection: 13'4" x 48" (416 x 122 cm), L: composite image of four video stills, R: Installation view at Galerie Lelong, New York, 2005. Both courtesy Galerie Lelong.

In Rakatansky's analysis, Wodiczko's work primarily problematizes discourses that overlook the social and historical dimensions involved in constructing individuals as

⁸⁸ Nancy Princenthal, "Krzysztof Wodiczko at Lelong," *Art in America*, November 2005, p. 170.

subjects. Since Michel Foucault's landmark book *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (*Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison*) there should be no doubt about the way subjects are constituted when objectified by the gaze of surveillance. Echoing earlier remarks about the way capitalism constructs alienated individuals and Rosalyn Deutsche's analysis of art's place in a public sphere constructed by social and political forces, Rakatansky says, "The social and psychological construction of the subject always circulates around the simultaneous yet complex abstraction of ideologies and their figuration."⁸⁹

In these installations, the social gest is not only that of today, the contemporary clothing of the handshakes, the timelessness of an eye, but also the gestures embodied in the monuments, demonstrating the historical nature of subjectivities and opening it up for paradigm shifts. Rakatansky says:

He cunningly uses the gestures of yesterday's history, yesterday's battles—usually considered both as inevitable and as 'dated' with all the strange quaintness of the past (the costumes, the looks, the slogans)—against the gestures of today's history, battles—which, with the alienating distance of time, will seem as quaint, as contrived, as constructed as those of the past. And thus (perhaps) the present might be seen as not inevitable, and thus (perhaps) the history of the past might also seem less than inevitable, less a matter of fact, and thus (perhaps) the constant rewriting of history that always occurs after the fact might also allow for a rewriting of the present.⁹⁰

The ideology of the public sphere immediately constitutes immigrants as outside of the particular history of a society, as exterior to the society they have adopted, but Wodiczko's use of clichéd images, the symbol of the shepherd's rod in *Alien Staff*, facilitates his critique of the historical nature of subjectivities. He demonstrates that identities are not fixed and modes of subjectivity can fluctuate.

⁸⁹ Rakatansky, 1994, p. 18.

⁹⁰ Rakatansky, 1994, p. 23. The gestures of yesterday embodied in monuments are the subjects of the majority of articles and research projects concerning Wodiczko's work. See the bibliography for further reading.

What Rakatansky calls Wodiczko's "disfiguring to show the disfiguration of historical time already at work, a disfiguring to allow for a refiguring," is the result of his use of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* on the social gesture, alienating it so that the audience can itemize, analyze, and criticize its constitutive parts, its origins, and its forces of social construction.⁹¹ As these works demonstrate, Wodiczko adopts and transforms the use of light projections to critique the social and political forces that constitute the immigrant subject. While Müller primarily used projections to supplement the inherent limitations of the stage, importing cinematographic editing techniques such as montage into the auditorium, Brecht revises this practice to provide an overtly didactic element as one among many of the separate elements of his epic theater and to push theater in the direction of cinema. In his transformation of these techniques, Wodiczko's exploration of the medium of projection has proven artistically productive in deconstructing the social forces at work in the constitution of certain individuals and groups of individuals as subjects. By alienating the social gest, Wodiczko hopes the audience is able to deconstruct and ultimately transform or reconstruct the alien social powers that constitute each immigrant as a particular kind of subject independently of his or her will.

Part 2: Immigrant as Actor, Staff as Character: Alien of Alien

An updated reading of the spectacle was necessary in the last chapter to render Debord's analysis of the alienating effects of consumption relevant to Wodiczko's *Alien*

⁹¹ Evidencing Brecht's unquestionable Marxist influence, he uses *Entfremdung*, Marx's word for alienated labor, in his article "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," from around 1936, but reverses its meaning. He says, "The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically...by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation (*Entfremdung*): the alienation that is necessary to all understanding." From: Brecht 1964, p. 71.

Staff, and in much the same way, Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* can only facilitate an analysis of the work of a contemporary artist once it is historicized. *Alien Staff* adopts the moving image in a miniaturized and intimate format, which calls for an exploration of the personal dimension of the alienation effect and the transference of these techniques to the street demonstration. In this respect, Brecht's discussion of the alienation effect in relation to the art of acting becomes one of this instrument's conditions of legibility. While the projections alienate the social gest for critique through its displacement in a new context, the *Alien Staff* highlights the social forces at work in the construction of the immigrant subject specifically, including the depersonalization of the particularity of an individual immigrant's narrative by virtue of the broad categorization and generalization of the "immigrant experience." As Wodiczko says, "Xenology is the art of refusal to be fused, an art of delimitization, deidentification, and disintegration."⁹² In one sense, *Alien Staff* can be conceived as disfiguring, in the hopes of subsequently refiguring, the process of identifying and generalizing the immigrant with a stereotyped immigrant narrative, and in this sense, the screen in the staff can be seen to isolate representation and mediation as forces that construct subjects in their own right.

In "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," written for the winter 1936 issue of *Life and Letters*, Brecht uses the example of the Chinese theater to propose a new model of acting for the epic theater. Actors who do not perform as though a theatrical fourth wall separates them from their audience embody their awareness of being watched and inhibit the audience's illusion of being "unseen spectators at an event which is really

⁹² Wodiczko, 1999, p. 131.

taking place.”⁹³ On the contrary, when the actor of the Aristotelian drama reaches as close an approximation of fully embodying his or her character the most convincingly, he or she seeks to persuade the audience that it is the character and not a mere actor who stands before them on the stage. For Brecht, a thespian performance that engenders this sensation that an actor has *become* his or her part is a travesty.⁹⁴ Rather than becoming the character, the actor is meant to act as though he or she were demonstrating what a character is, which retains the separation of the two and permits the audience to contemplate the conditions of the character rather than to be amused or even amazed at how well the actor represents.

In much the same way as Brecht speaks of the actor disidentifying from his or her character, Wodiczko implies that the *Alien Staff* creates a duality of the operator and his or her narrative contained in the video history on the screen. As Wodiczko says:

Using this walking speech-act instrument, a stranger, a story-teller, would feel he or she was perceived as a respectful and articulate actor in today's urban landscape. In this way the stranger could be reinforced by his or her 'porte-parole,' as a companion, a confidant. There would now be two of them: the stranger as a character and as an actor.⁹⁵

In the image below, the woman on the right holds her staff in her hand with another woman opposite her. The distance the woman places between herself and the object physically embodies the distance she also seeks to place between herself constituted as an

⁹³ Brecht, 1964, p. 92. Brecht has been criticized for his fundamental misunderstanding of Chinese classical theater in Min Tian, "'Alienation-Effect' for whom? Brecht's (Mis)interpretation of the Classical Chinese Theatre," *Asian Theatre Journal* 14.2, Autumn 1997, pp. 200-222.

⁹⁴ Musings on estrangement techniques were not new at this time, and Brecht's interest in alienation has been traced back to the Russian author Viktor Sklovskij's concept "Priem Ostrannenija," which translates as "device for making strange." The Russian avant-garde group Soyuz Molodyozhi and their play "Victory Over the Sun," first performed in 1913, are notable in the history of theater for the use of amateurs actors, which has a particular relationship to Brecht and the alienation effect. A key component of his plays are the music, influenced by the German composition technique known as *Gebrauchsmusik*, whose innovations included the use of amateurs to play music. John Willet, ed. *Brecht On Theatre*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1964, p.99.

⁹⁵ Wodiczko, "Open Transmission," *Performance Research* 2.3, 1997, p. 4.

immigrant subject and the talking head, which represents the traumatized subject of her bygone days now alienated in this social constellation.

The screen in this paradigm becomes secondary to the social interaction between real people. In a profound sense, Wodiczko is capable also of using the real body of the operator-immigrant to alienate the screen to permit the shift from the audience's complete absorption in the representation to the possibility of commentary. They interrogate not the immigrant as a representative of the alien force of the generalized and stereotyped image of the immigrant identity (which the screen, in one sense, can be thought to represent), but rather as messengers bringing to their listeners the story of some individual whom they are supposed to interrogate. The staff is an object on display, which suddenly becomes a secondary concern in the presence of the immigrant.



Image 28: *Alien Staff*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, first generation, performer unknown, location unknown, 1992.

The decreasing size of the screen in the later generations of the *Alien Staff* is significant for this reason, since the smaller screens exacerbate the abstraction of the representation on the screen and complicates its direct relationship of representation to the body in the flesh. In the image below on the left, Wodiczko stands holding the first

generation of his *Alien Staff*, and a larger representation of his face is visible on the screen. It would not be difficult for one of his interlocutors to identify him in that image, but the later generation of the *Staff* shows a clear interest in distancing the operator from their video-history. In the image on the right, we can see a woman holding the second generation whose screen only projects an image of the brow and eyes of an individual not clearly identifiable as the woman holding the object. The audience potentially bypasses its impulse to see the screen as a representation of the immigrant, and rather permits the immigrant to demonstrate and present the staff as an independent and alien force, in direct contradistinction also to the prosthetic impulse that lends itself to posthuman discourses.

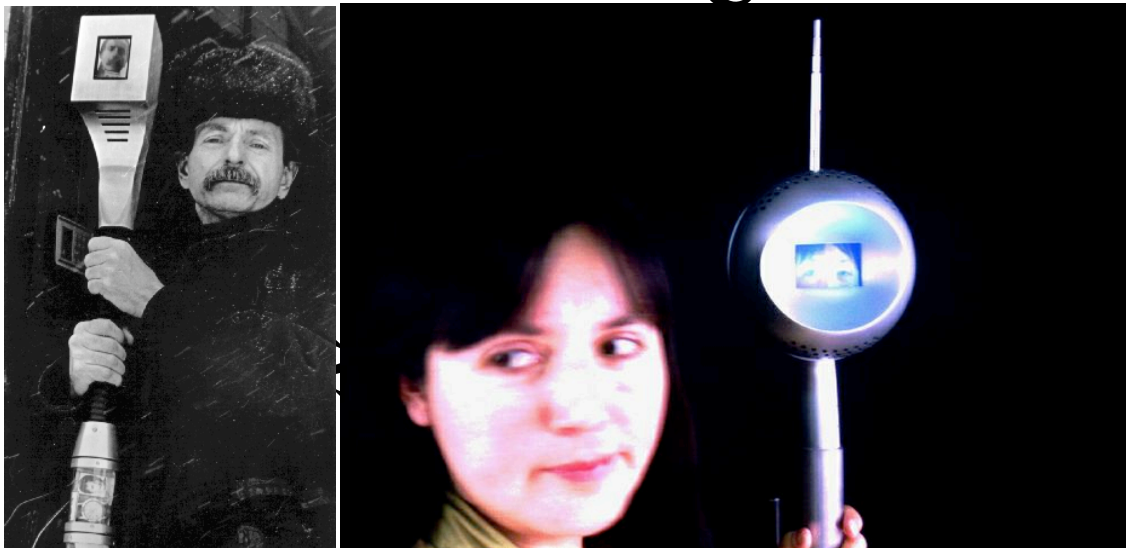


Image 29: *Alien Staff*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, first generation, performed by Krzysztof Wodiczko, location unknown, 1992.

Image 30: *Alien Staff*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, second generation, performer unknown, location unknown, 1993.

Natalie of France who operated *Mouthpiece*, quoted early in the first chapter, further supports this that the Immigrant Instruments move towards the distancing and disidentification of the operator-immigrant from his or her embodied video history.

Natalie says, “Anyway, when you wear the object in the street, people can easily think

that it is not your mouth that is on the screen. It's reassuring, and the feeling takes away some of the responsibility. You wear this object on your face, and it's very, very close to you. You wear this object on your face, but at a distance."⁹⁶

The new attitude *vis-à-vis* the theater, the stage, and the audience in Brecht's epic theater, which Wodiczko's operator-immigrant demonstrates, inhibits the empathic relationship between the spectator and these inherently artificial constructions, exhausting the stage's potential for magic and illusion. The stage reveals itself *in its artificiality* to the audience so that "no 'hypnotic tensions' should be set up."⁹⁷ Furthermore, the naturalist performance style requires a new relationship to the development of the plot, or in the case of Wodiczko's work, a new relationship of the operator to the video-history. No longer playing into the audience's voyeuristic illusion of peeking into real events occurring with real people, the actors of the epic theater highlight the artificiality of the stage by playing their part as though everything had been rehearsed many times over. Since the actors already know in advance how the plot will play out, they can easily highlight the fact that they already know how the events onstage transpire. What this suggests is the ability of the actor to shift from *representing* to *demonstrating* his or her character. Brecht says:

It should be apparent all through his performance that 'even at the start and in the middle he knows how it ends' and he must 'thus maintain calm independence throughout...Just as the actor no longer has to persuade the audience that it is the author's character and not himself that is standing on the stage, so also he need not pretend that the events taking place on the stage have never been rehearsed, and are now happening for the first time.'⁹⁸

Alienated from his or her character, the operator-immigrant is allowed to demonstrate, rather than merely represent, the often reprehensible conditions under which their

⁹⁶ Wodiczko, "Voices of the Mouthpiece," *Critical Vehicles: Writings, Projects, Interviews*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, p. 128.

⁹⁷ Willet, 1964, p. 136.

⁹⁸ Brecht, 1964, p. 194.

character lives, and this new demonstrative quality of the performance retains the separation of the performer from the character performed, as something other, to be shown and presented. This reinforces the claim, also, that the operator is intended to disidentify from the character.

The series of rehearsals when the operator-immigrant prepares his or her video history is a process of disidentification from this history, disfiguring their identification as that individual. By becoming so familiar with their migration stories the operators can take the staff into the public sphere, present the narrative embodied in the staff, and answer questions about what the talking head on the screen recounts. Wodiczko verbalizes this for Christiane Paul when he says, “The performer must also become alienated from the staff. Alien of the alien, a kind of double alienation: ‘Don’t listen to this, it wasn’t really like this, I now realize it was different, we went through this so many times and now I find this aspect much more important, just listen to this part.’”⁹⁹

The operator-immigrant presents the story embodied in the staff as though it is somehow artificial or foreign, which the audience and the operator can objectively interrogate together. In this respect, the *Alien Staff* is allowed to change over from being merely a representation of the operator-immigrant into a critical vehicle for the critique of the conditions that brought about the operator’s need to immigrate, or that created the traumatic experiences that the character in the staff represents.¹⁰⁰ The audience, much

⁹⁹ Paul, 1999, p. 34. This echoes Mark Rakatansky description of Wodiczko’s work as disfiguring and refiguring the immigrant’s identity. Wodiczko says, “There is a process of construction at work here, a recollection of events and the reconstruction of ties with the past from a new, healthier point of view.” *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁰ It would be inaccurate to say, and it is by no means the intent of this thesis to claim, that the operator is supposed to *completely* dissociate from the character represented in the staff, or to say that the staff *completely* breaks free from representation. In the first case, the staff would lose its ideal psychotherapeutic dimension, which is integral to the work. Additionally, representation and signification are important components for grounding critique in an object of criticism.

like in Brecht's theater, is subsequently expected to intellectually contemplate the underlying conditions of the video history, rather than to immerse themselves in the representation on the screen. In this sense, Wodiczko employs the real body of the immigrant to break the illusion of the representation of the screen, alienating the alienating effects of the spectacle and ideally isolating these experiences for the intellectual critique.

Part 3: Representation as Physical Gesture

The strong and multifaceted relationship between Wodiczko's *Alien Staff* and Brecht's theory of acting is the most difficult to bring to bear on close analysis of visual material. Furthermore, it overlooks what Walter Benjamin observes about the epic theater when he argues that the characteristics of the drama are not in themselves relevant except in the way they produce a new definition of the stage. Benjamin argues:

The aims of the epic theater can be defined more easily in terms of the stage than of a new drama. Epic theater allows for a circumstance which has been too little noticed. It may be called the filling in of the orchestra pit. The abyss which separates the players from the audience as it does the dead from the living; the abyss whose silence in a play heightens the sublimity, whose resonance in an opera heightens the intoxication... The stage is still raised, but it no longer rises from an unfathomable depth; it has become a dias. The didactic play and the epic theater are attempts to sit down at this dias.¹⁰¹

The preceding arguments about Wodiczko's work would seem to imply that the artist achieves Brecht's dream of turning the theater stage into a dias constituting a theater in the streets by lowering the stage, filling in the orchestra pit, and turning the *street* into a dias. However, the direct translation of Brecht's techniques into our analysis of Wodiczko's work radically oversimplifies matters and constricts our ability to analyze *Alien Staff* as it performs on its operator and its audience.

¹⁰¹ Benjamin, 1968, p. 154.

The climate of the Weimar period, politically, socially, economically, and aesthetically, was very different than what confronts an audience today. The commodity's saturation of daily life, which transforms the consumption of objects into the consumption of mere images, had not yet occurred in the degree we see today, and this is where the need to historicize Brecht's techniques becomes significantly more important. As Fredric Jameson says:

The fundamental difference between our own situation and that of the thirties is the emergence in full-blown and definitive form of that ultimate transformation of late monopoly capitalism variously known as the *société de consommation* or as post-industrial society... More relevant in the present context, however, is the Frankfurt School's premise of a 'total system', which expressed Adorno's and Horkheimer's sense of the increasingly closed organization of the world into a seamless web of media technology, multinational corporations, and international bureaucratic control. Whatever the theoretical merits of the idea of the 'total system'... we may at least agree with Adorno that in the cultural realm, the all-pervasiveness of the system, with its 'culture-' or (Eizensberger's variant) its 'consciousness-industry', makes for an unpropitious climate for any of the older, simpler forms of oppositional art.¹⁰²

Brecht tries to assimilate the narrative techniques of the "street demonstration" into the epic theater through the use of the screen to interrupt the illusion of the stage. Wodiczko on the other hand brings the techniques of the stage, the use of real people, into his contemporary street demonstration in a world overrun by screens and representations, in order to interrupt the spectacular alienation by jolting people out of their contemplation and consumption of images to shift from representation to commentary.

To highlight the operator-immigrant's role as that of showing, in contrast to merely representing, Wodiczko's later generations of *Alien Staff* turn the act of demonstration into a physical gesture. Unlike the first generation of the staff whose video-history plays without any necessary intervention on the part of the operator, the later generations *require* a certain degree of physical interaction, which highlights the act

¹⁰² Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion," *Aesthetics and Politics* (1977), London: Verso Press, 2007, p. 208.

of narration through its constitution as a movement. The operator must wave his or her hand in front of sensors in order to alternate between stories, much like turning the pages in a book, or like Brecht's employment of a narrator who comes onto the stage to precede many of his scenes with brief descriptions of what is going to come to pass. This interaction between the performer and the instrument breaks the illusion of the VDT and fundamentally disrupts the spectacular representation of the screen confused for an independent form of representation by materializing the image's dependence on its operator.¹⁰³ *Alien Staff* alienates representation itself as a force for constructing individuals and suggests an alternative model to independent, spectacular representations of immigrants that homogenize the multiplicity of experiences in contrast to the particularities an individual immigrant's experience and narrative.



Image 31: *Alien Staff*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, second generation, performer unknown, location unknown, 1993.

Image 32: *Alien Staff*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, first generation, performed by Jagoda Przybylak, New York, 1992-1993. Courtesy Galerie Lelong.

¹⁰³ "Wherever representation takes on an independent existence, the spectacle reestablishes its rule." Debord, (1967) 1995, p. 18.

The image below comes from the same performance of Brecht's *Mahagonny-Songspiel* (1927) discussed earlier in this chapter. Again, the boxing ring is visible on the stage, but the projection has been removed. Instead, in this image there are six individuals holding signs in the ring, reading "Für Irdischer Lohn" ("For a Living Wage"), "Gegen die Civilis" ("Against Civil Society"), "Sterblichkeit" ("Mortality"), and "Seele" ("Soul"). In the 1927 performance, as in the later version of the play, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, a narrator sometimes announced scene-titles between the songs, and it may be that the woman standing at the right corner of the ring closest the front of the stage is this narrator. Directly addressing the audience with prefatory comments on the upcoming scene works in two ways. First, the audience is able to intellectually engage with the piece by virtue of knowing what will transpire and thus experiencing less anticipation. Second, it interrupts the production on stage to break the illusion of representation, reminding the audience that it is nothing more than a stage production prepared many times in advance, for which the audience has paid a certain entry fee, and which will be staged again.

The scene portrayed in this image is of a protest in the latter scenes of the *Mahagonny* plays, when the citizens of Mahagonny realize that the cost of living far exceeds the wages they receive for their work. They begin to understand the role of the city's economic policies in funneling what would otherwise be their increased wages into the pockets of the men who founded the city. They protest, demanding living wages.¹⁰⁴

This rehearsal photograph of *Mahagonny-Songspiel* from 1927 at Baden-Baden demonstrates however, the importation of the street into the theater, which implies the

¹⁰⁴ It is deceiving to use an image from a Brecht play of a demonstration or protest to illustrate his use of the alienation effect and remain bound to the claim that the "street demonstration" is not related to protests.

destruction of the fourth wall and the illusion of pure representation, and the shift into commentary and the didactic elements of the epic theater. The audience is not supposed to contemplate the exquisite production, or the elaborate divulgence of the plot of the play with its twists and turns and all its unforeseen circumstances. The epic theater is about teaching the audience that the conditions under which individuals live and survive are historical circumstances that are subject to criticism and change.

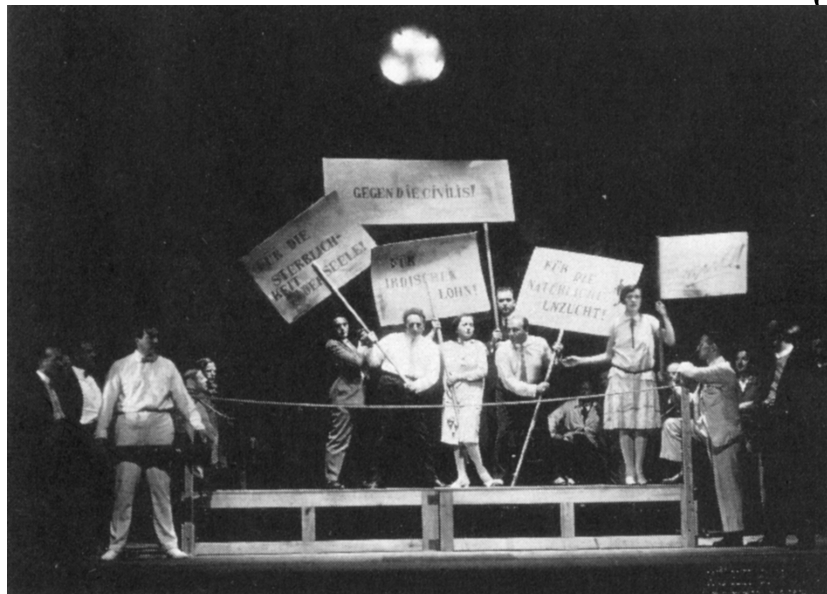


Image 33: *Mahagonny* (Songspiel), Bertolt Brecht und Erwin Piscator, Probe mit Bertolt Brecht, Baden-Baden, 1927.

Image 34: *Alien Staff*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, performers unknown, Stockholm, Sweden, 1994.

Symmetrically, Wodiczko has brought the techniques of Brecht's epic theater into the streets. In the image above, two relatively well-dressed, darker-skinned men each hold an *Alien Staff* and speak to a man in a navy blue blazer. The screens of the hooded staff are equal to their height, and the entirety of each reliquary is visible. This image would represent just another typical example of a performance with their staff except that behind this quiet scene we can see the headshots of two actors, and to the left of the reflecting doors there appears to be a billboard plastered with playbills and calendar announcements. The sign above the entrance says "Klara nätter på Stadsteatern," which translates as "Bright Nights at the City Theater" and indicates that this scene takes place outside the hub of the dramatic arts in Stockholm, Sweden. In contrast to the classical, theatrical predispositions of their famous counterparts behind them, these two operator-immigrants are unknown, unrecognizable faces in the urban landscape, trying to insert their video-histories into the public discourse, all the while trying to distance themselves from the various forces that alienate them.

The global economic and political conditions of which immigration is a part are different from those during the period of Brecht's theatrical experimentation, and the techniques that Brecht used in the 1920s and 30s would seem unusual today. Wodiczko exports the alienation effect from Brecht's stage and transforms it into the performances with *Alien Staff* while reversing Brecht's logic with his use real bodies to break the illusion of representation of the screen. The simultaneous co-presence of an individual's body and their video-representation creates a similar psychic dissonance that leads to a critique of the conditions that necessitate the object.

Wodiczko is not trying to improve the epic theater or perfect the dissolution of the stage and the fourth wall that Benjamin argues is Brecht's goal. He instead brings techniques informed by the alienation effect of the theater of the Weimar Republic and their predecessors as a significant component of street performances. He has adopted the matter-of-factness of the Brechtian acting style and has alienated the narrator from the narrative so that the operator-immigrant no longer needs to embody or represent his or her character. The operators can now "demonstrate" or present their video histories as something other, after they have already worked through their self-education about the conditions under which they once subsisted, their own complicity in these conditions, and the alien economic, political, and social forces that have constructed them as alienated subjects. The demythification of the performance and the destruction of the illusion of representation produce the changeover from representation to commentary in Wodiczko's work, and perhaps it is in a practice of this sort that we can discover the possibility for a critical theatricality.

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Concluding Remarks

This conceptual analysis of alienation does not take for granted the fact that the Krzysztof Wodiczko is interested in foreigners, strangers, and aliens. This investigation of the political and social implications of *Alien Staff* (1992) instead required a close analysis of myriad forces that alienate people, specifically immigrants, and this approach has proven fruitful. This thesis accepted the uncommon task of questioning the first principles of Wodiczko's work, and it asserts the need to interrogate what the artist takes for granted: that the immigrant is alienated. Dissected this self-evident observation provided, on the contrary, a rich space for the exploration of multiple dimensions to Wodiczko's work that scholar otherwise overlook. The geo-political alienation of immigrants has proven inadequate in the face of this analysis, in contrast to the multiple forms of alienation that immigrants face. The economic forces of contemporary society often influence the specific technical and formal strategies that Wodiczko uses in his attempt to facilitate the deconstruction and reconstruction of immigrant subjectivities.

This thesis sought to gather these various notions, to interrogate them within constellations of Wodiczko's objects and those of his recognizable influences, and to propose that the richness of this artist's work is to be found in the different hues it acquires when highlighted by this analysis of the alien forces at work that produce alienated subjects of different kinds. *Alien Staff* is a compelling work that migrates between the commodity and the rhetorical object, between highlighting and exacerbating isolation and foreignness, and between the ability to alienate the spectacle and the capacity of the spectacle to inevitably reinforce its superior ability to undermine forms of critique. *Alien Staff* proves elusive to attempts to define it: what it is or its "aboutness."

This approach has proven unable to resolve the complex challenges this piece poses. On the other hand, we have looked at numerous ways that this instrument functions: what it does, what it wants, and how it behaves. Inevitably certain questions remained unanswered.

We sought in the first chapter to determine what type of object the *Alien Staff* is and the categories of individuals for whom Wodiczko designed it. The immigrant-operator eluded easy classification, but the artist's writings and the works themselves clarify that the operator is constituted as a subject by many independent and alien forces. *Alien Staff* demonstrates the attempt to deconstruct the forces at work that constitute immigrants as outsiders, and Wodiczko genuinely believes in the possibility of working heuristically and practically to facilitate the immigrant's attempts to navigate the forces that constitute them as subjects.

The second chapter of this thesis demonstrated the relationship between economic forces of the contemporary world, of which immigration is one consequence, and the various formulations of alienation that arise in an analysis of the political economy. In this context, the *Alien Staff* is intended, among other things, to particularize the narrative of the immigrant-operator in contrast to mediated representations that constitute the abstract stereotype of Immigrants and constitute him or her as an alienated subject. However like other public art, Wodiczko's work must contend with the ideological dimension of public spaces. Finally, this chapter suggested that Wodiczko's work hovers precariously at the boundaries between visibility and invisibility, on the one hand, and critique and neutralization on the other. The artist proves himself at times to be reticent of

the totalizing logic of spectacle and at times to naïvely assume that he can occupy the public sphere with what he believes to be a neutral apparatus.

The final chapter argued that alienation is also a theatrical technique that Wodiczko uses to isolate the conditions he seeks to critique. The immigrant creates a distance from their video history by various means, which alienates the audience in a number of ways, and *Alien Staff* consequently engenders a possibility for the changeover from representation to commentary. The body of the immigrant renders the device in his or her hand peripheral and secondary to the experience of two individuals who can speak about and offer critiques of the material and psychological conditions of the character embodied in the representation on the screen.

Wodiczko's hope is to influence the world and the change the conditions that are the immigrant-operator's reality, but in some cases, the alienation that is consequent of the conditions of production and consumption in today's economic paradigm proves to undermine his attempt at critique. At other times, however, alienation demonstrates a redeeming component that offers a space within which dialogue and critique may be possible. In another project, perhaps, these observations and arguments may be brought to bear on different facets of Wodiczko's work, particularly with relation to the motivations and consequences of his particular forms of critique. Perhaps then we may understand more about the conceptual, political, and social principles that influence the work Wodiczko creates, and interrogate the various ways the concepts outlined in this thesis influence our understanding of Wodiczko's practice as it lends itself to various types of critique.

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